RICARDO G. CURCI

DOCTORS AND DOGS

For Alberto Ramponelli, my teacher above all, and a

unconditional friend, because he will be in all the books, always.

For Esteban Curci, my brother,

because he unites us

most

indissoluble, childhood.

For Laura, my wife, once again and as always, for

Give me every day the bittersweet overdoses of true love.

“Each one is his child and his corpse.”

César Fernández Moreno

THE ENGLISH FIELDS

1

Ibáñez parked the Falcon next to Dr. Farías's Mercedes, but this time he did not feel his chronic envy of the Minister of Health. He had gotten up at five in the morning to perform an autopsy that any of his colleagues could have performed. But the minister had called exclusively to him.

-They moved the body from London. "I'll explain the matter to you tomorrow," he had told her on the phone the night before.

And here I was now, in the parking lot behind the morgue building, in front of the wall that hid the crematorium, under a cold, cloudy August sky. He left his hands still on the steering wheel, and in a few seconds he had them numb. He had forgotten his gloves, as well as turning on the car's heater. He even had the window open and almost didn't notice. Because his attention was focused on that wall, and he was observing it as if he were

seeing it for the first time. Not as if he were seeing a wall of bricks and cement, but a glass behind which the fire from the crematorium threatened to burst the glass and the flames took him and everything he cared about.

-But tomorrow they give me my son's results, you know that he has been hospitalized for ten days... -Ibáñez had answered.

-Let someone else take care of the family, doctor...

Mateo Ibáñez felt humiliated. An answer like that would have caused a very different reaction in him if other concerns had not kept him abstracted and distant. But he was not going to explain to Farias what he already knew, no matter how much the minister claimed confidence that no one had given him, that Blas's mother had been dead since the boy was two years old. Now Blas needed him more than ever, undoubtedly much more than that dead man behind the wall. He thought about his eight-year-old son, lying in a clinic bed waiting for the lab result. He remembered the bags under the eyes, the thin and disheveled hair, and between the sheets the limp body and the marked ribs, the veins forming a map of sinuous paths, valleys and mountains.

But here he was, present at the right time to do his job. A body was waiting for him with its usual smell, purple skin and that enormous stillness that so calmed him when contemplating the dead. A more effective therapy than psychoanalysis, he had told himself many times.

He locked the car and looked with contempt at the shiny frame of the Mercedes. He entered through the back door of the building and was greeted by the ammoniacal aroma of the operating rooms, the smell of bleach that the cleaning people left in the hallways, and further away, towards the exit on the other street, the aroma of coffee in the confectionery. .

-Good morning, Dr. Ibáñez. How is his son? -Asked the secretary.

-No news for now, thank you.

He continued walking to the locker room. The manager greeted him and gave him the ambo. Nobody had arrived yet.

-Where are everybody?

"I don't think anyone is coming except you and your nurse, doctor," the other answered.

Farias was taking it out on him, there was no doubt, but he didn't remember anything pending with the minister. He was savoring the anger while he tied the straps of his pants with difficulty over an abdomen that had grown more than expected in the last five years, and tied the ribbon of his hat and chinstrap on his head of red hair and beard. His large, freckled hands, with fingers of thick hair on the back, were getting in the way of

those new uniforms that someone from the ministry had decided to change without consulting those who were going to wear them and that always turned out to be too small for him. He slammed the metal cabinet shut and walked out the door that led to the operating room.

The nurse was already changed and she greeted him with a smile that she guessed behind the mask. Soledad was a beautiful woman, single as they said, but she never talked about that.

-They woke us up Prano today, doctor. Not even the sun came out at all.

-Appropriate for the taste for the dead. It isn't true?

Soledad did not answer her, accustomed to her cynicism, to that mixture of sadness and love for the profession, perhaps also of hatred and resignation with which her hands acted on the bodies. Ibáñez washed his hands and returned to the operating room, letting himself put on his nightgown and gloves. He smelled Soledad's scent when she came within a few centimeters of her face. She didn't wear perfume, but it was the smell of a thirty-year-old woman under the light of the lamps that illuminated the ends of her brown hair emerging from the edges of the cap. Then he looked at her body on the table, naked and with her arms at her sides, palms up, feet tilted slightly outward, mouth open, eyelids closed, and the yellowish color of her skin. There were stains of caked dirt, especially on the somewhat long black hair. A man of perhaps thirty-five years old, no older than himself, thin and of average height. Then he asked:

-What do we have today, Soledad?

But before waiting for a response or even listening to it, as he approached the body he saw that there were strands of grass between her teeth.

2

Like every morning, I argued with Cintia before leaving for work, although I no longer remember if the reason was different from every day. I checked the mailbox, and next to the service receipts I found a letter with an English postage stamp. It seemed strange to me that someone, apart from the law firm that deals with the inheritance issue, would write to me from there. When I returned home I left it next to the phone. I thought Cintia had already gone to bed, but when I finished eating and was about to open the letter, she came to interrupt me, protesting about everything that had happened during the day, the unbearable routine that exacerbated it, not knowing that the daze of His voice also exasperated me more and more.

She was in her bathrobe and disheveled. Nothing remained in her that she had ever seen. In his face and in his voice there remained traces that still shone, however, like fragments of coppery metal that reminded me of what I had loved in Cintia, and that I could not put aside, like that love established and firm in the seat of the habit.

She threatened to leave me. At first I didn't know how to answer. She had said it many times before, so I ignored her. But she is always capable of doing the opposite of what others expect.

The next day we argued again, and I think I hit her. I don't know, I was so angry with her and also with me, that I don't remember if I raised my hand before or after saying this or that, or if it was her or I who spoke just before the blow. I do remember my palm being red for a few minutes afterwards. That night we didn't talk anymore. We slept in the same bed, and as always I wondered what name to give to that attitude as cold as ice of going to bed hating each other. Because even ice can cause pain, and that bed was already as insensitive as a stone, we were a couple of invalids on a sacrificial bed.

3

Soledad began to read the police report and translate the technicalities that Mateo disliked.

-They found him in a field on the outskirts of London. According to experts' calculations, he was exposed to the open air for five days.

-When he arrived?

-Last night, and the trip must have lasted twelve hours, at least, plus delays in food science.

-And to that we must add at least two days of procedures in London.

-Here she says that it took them four to identify the fingerprints.

-But do you expect me to believe that this body has been around for more than ten days and that it still remains that way? Yes he barely has almost a smell.

Ibáñez moved to the other side of the dissection table. The corpse lay placid and hermetic to his restlessness. He tried to block out the feeling, growing like a vertigo, that his son was too similar in that position, and told himself that it was not the similarity of lying down that made them similar, but the circumstance, not the cause of illness or death, but something that

related them indirectly, linked by a logic that he had not yet found. He knew that logic sometimes lacks common sense, austere and unwavering on its way to verifying something that may be nothingness or the universe of zero.

"Let's start," he said, while Soledad took a recorder and pressed the power button. The red dot blinked, and the cassette reels spun. She put on the gloves and handed him the scalpel.

-Scraped skin on head and neck. Preserved elasticity. Retroauricular hematomas. Dirt in the corners of the mouth. Depressed sternal thorax, congenital pectum excavatum. Let's see the back.

Soledad moved the handle that raised the stretcher to one side of her. Ibáñez turned the body to the side and tied it. The skin there did have signs of time passing. ridicule It was wet and came off easily.

-Common decomposition process due to contact with earth and mud. She had to die on her back and stay like that for five days in the field. There are larvae under the skin.

She made a cut under the left shoulder blade. She began to see clotted blood with tiny white parasites. She took a sample for the lab. She continued to cut deeper, but the muscles were so soft that they escaped the edge. He put the scalpel aside and felt with his fingers. Fragments of muscle crumbled in his hands.

-I don't understand, it seems that on this side the corpse was actually older than we calculated, it seems to have more than thirty days of decomposition.

She looked at him alone as if she were joking, sometimes she didn't know if the doctor was serious or just ironic. But this time she limited herself to listening to him and giving him the instruments she asked for.

-Do you know that today they give me Blas's results?

-Yes doctor. Out of delicacy I didn't want to ask but... why didn't she ask for the day off?

-Because the minister resents me, and this time he found the opportunity to screw me. If Blas has to have a transplant, I will take him to the United States, without hesitation, and I need money and resources. Farias is a safe passage for me at this moment.

Cynthia left me. Last night I saw her pack her bags, put things away quickly and scrupulously, as if she were planning a lifelong trip. I saw her leave the house without another word or even a glance. I stood in the kitchen, staring at the cup of coffee she had drunk ten minutes before, still bearing the mark of her lips. I looked at the phone, thinking that maybe I should call someone, as if the device were the only fixed thing in that house that was spinning like a top, and then I saw the letter again. I opened it for the first time since it arrived almost a week ago. But I couldn't read it because it is written in English. Furthermore, my mind was outside my body, perhaps walking around the house and noticing Cintia's absence.

I woke up late and didn't go to work. I tried to locate her without success. I only managed to let our acquaintances find out what happened before. I saw the envelope left next to the phone again, but I didn't turn to the letter until after lunch. I don't know why I persisted in turning the pages looking for some word that was understandable to me. I never really cared about learning English, and I always knew that my life is not one that takes its owners far from the place of its birth. Because I believe that my life does what it wants with me. I am just a man and my life is my woman.

I thought I should take the letter to my lawyers. There seemed to be no relationship between it and the inheritance, but perhaps they could translate it. I called the office and they told me they were in London. They offered me help, I replied that it was not worth it, I would wait for her return.

The next day I had to go to work. I took the letter for the boss to translate. At the end of my shift I knocked on her door and entered the office. I never had problems with him - although sometimes he seemed conceited - so I dared to ask him for that favor with some confidence. He took the letter and began to read it under the desk light. She was in her shirt sleeves and with her tie loose. His glasses hid a glance directed at me from time to time, and I thought I saw signs of resentment. Then he looked at me openly. I wasn't wrong, there was a certain suspicion in his eyes. He told me that they offered me a job there in Europe, then he smiled saying idle phrases, and he patted me on the back with his sweaty hands.

I returned home thinking about the letter the entire way. I felt the envelope folded in my pocket, and I imagined the figures of the English words drawn on the pavement, on the sidewalk and the walls of the houses.

5

They turned the body face up again. Ibáñez plunged the scalpel into the chest, under the fork of the sternum. He extended the cut. The blood flowed

profusely at first, falling to the floor and onto the rubber boots. Ibáñez looked confused. The blood had not clotted in that area. He asked for compresses and gauze to dry the puddle that formed on the table.

-I think I was not wrong in coming, I would not forgive myself for having missed this, as long as we find an explanation.

He continued speaking to the recorder, describing the consistency and condition of the skin on the abdomen. He asked for a costotome and started cutting the left side. The sound of his bones sounded dull, he sank compresses and removed them again. His heart was purple and almost black, with signs of necrosis. With his right hand he moved it away and began to cut the arteries with the scissors. His aorta was almost empty, with walls of dark clots. He gave Soledad the organ and she put it in a black bag that he was then going to label. The inside of the chest was already dry, and the lungs looked like worn-out rubber sponges after many years of use. He pressed a little s opened them, and two jets of dark blood came out of the nose.

Soledad was startled, she knew that Ibáñez had started playing again.

-Don't do that again, doctor.

-It's just a trick I learned in college, but it shouldn't have worked on a body that's so old.

Sometimes she liked to joke with the dead, to feel that her hands could manipulate corpses because they were still alive. It was boasting, perhaps, a foolish pride of a wise and naive child that provokes smiles instead of hatred. The same as laughter while undergoing cancer surgery or crude jokes when attending an amputation. It was difficult to resist the temptation to appear alive in the face of death. Like an affirmation, an imperative need actually tinged with bitter fear.

And Blas in the clinic, lying like a breathing dead man. His almost useless little kidney half functioning, resting in its bed of blood and membranes while the body that contained it wasted away and dehydrated like a sponge in the sun. The viscera of the dead man he was opening could have been for his son, but he knew things weren't that simple. However, he had not been able to avoid that little game, that infinitely childish punishment towards a body that was of no use to save Blas's life.

It's been a week since she left. I was able to locate Cintia at her mother's house, after many failed attempts to get my mother-in-law to recognize that she was there. I finally spoke to him. But I wasn't convincing enough in asking him to come back. A part of me knew it while she was talking to him, seeing her expression of terrible boredom, like when we made love and she looked at me as if I were a burden or a bag on her body. Nothing she could say was going to convince her. She only mentioned the divorce issue and asked if my lawyer would be the same one who dealt with the fields issue. I thought, for a moment, that perhaps this unexpected inheritance could attract her, as if a probable and still imprecise small fortune could change her mind. But desperation makes us complicit in petty ideas, and draws on others our own faults and iniquities.

This conversation with Cintia disturbed me more than the abandonment of her. Maybe because her voice was unreal to me and I had the exact notion of what it was like to be without her.

I continued working without mentioning the letter. I stopped shaving every morning and it became a habit to eat out. Sometimes she would put me to bed without having eaten dinner, and without hunger.

On May 1st I woke up very late. I started going through the inheritance papers after lunch. This time, like the first, I kept wondering where these guys I'd never heard of could have come from. The lawyers said that they were twins, they were over eighty years old when they died at home, peacefully and each in their own bed, because they were single. They had gone to bed after working in the fields and receiving visits from their neighbors before nightfall. They drank their last cup of tea with the poison they used to kill the pests in their garden. Two days later, they found two wells removed next to the house. They, perhaps, had worked digging and getting dirty with the earth as if there were a message there, or trying to listen to a deep call that they could not ignore.

I don't have my mother or father to ask, but I do remember that when I was a child, they told me stories about Europe. I even seem to remember images evoked by those words, tables of cakes and sweets at tea parties between old ladies and marriageable young women in their winter gardens, looking through windows with screen doors at the withered victims of the Welsh autumn cold. Spectators watching a postman deliver from house to house the parcels that they themselves had sent. They didn't need to see to know what was happening behind the walls when the door closed and the postman walked away, just as I knew what happens to me here and now, thousands of miles away and in time.

I think I fell asleep, but when I woke up I still had the hum in my ears that the murmurs and voices of those women had transformed into mentioning facts and surnames. The last name Martins, slightly hinted at, confirmed to me that sometimes memories have more life than reality,

because they are beyond the will of whoever wants to bring them. They return as accidents, without mercy.

I looked up and rubbed my eyes. Next to the phone I found the letter again, and this time I clung to it. I began to observe the envelope first, turning it over as if it were a laboratory specimen. Then I remembered that Cintia had studied English, and although she had not practiced it for a long time, perhaps she could clarify certain doubts that she did not dare to ask my boss. and. I arrived at the apartment and she greeted me with less displeasure than she had expected. Luckily her mother was not there. When I gave her the letter she started reading it. While she did so, I asked her for details about the job they were offering me, but just a few seconds later she crumpled the paper and put it in my pocket, shaking with rage. I didn't understand until she told me about the woman who had written the letter and the obscene details she described there. I didn't have time to say anything else because she fired me from the department.

I walked around the neighborhood before returning home. When I went to bed I uncrumpled the envelope and asked myself again and again what was incomprehensible. But I was too tired to think about what was really strange about it all.

7

Ibáñez took the scalpel in his right hand again and opened the abdomen. He ordered separators and explored the cavity. Ten centimeters of fatty tissue separated the skin from his muscles, and he opened deeper again, but this time little blood came out.

"Normal state of the peripheral tissue," he said for the report. "Slight hemorrhages at the incision and muscle with initial necrosis."

But as he dipped his hand a little deeper, he touched something he couldn't see. He widened the cut and spread the edges further apart. Then he saw that he had been feeling viscera as hard as stone, although that was not exactly the sensation.

-Hardened stomach, with tense outer walls, wine-black color, with collapsed veins. Dilated cardia, obstructed pylorus. Give me the scissors, Soledad.

He dissected the esophagus and cut it to half its length. Then he explored down the intestine, and found the same consistency along almost its entire length.

-I'm going to cut.

Soledad handed him the thick scissors, then the scalpel when he encountered greater resistance. He raised his left hand with his full stomach. He left the viscera on the table and began to open it on one of his sides. The edges of the wall distended, revealing a mass of mud in the exact shape of a stomach.

-But this is not land, doctor?

-Yes, ordinary earth.

He plunged a tong into the dough and it broke like an ancient pot. The pieces of clay began to dissolve in the serum with which Soledad cleaned the surface of the table. Ibáñez searched the body again. He cut and removed the rest of the intestine. More than a meter of viscera began to roll up on the table, and mud flowed from each cut, dissolving and spreading in the space that the blood had occupied, enveloping the silhouette of the corpse until it dried again. As if the nature of man was in accordance with the teachings of the Bible: man made from dust to return to dust. And water as an instrument or medium of transition. From the earth fed by rain life is born, and this man was like a plant that had lived until it withered. But Ibáñez pushed aside these absurd thoughts. He was feeling agitated and evidently worried. His hands did not shake as might be expected from someone less experienced, but his eyes expressed what his mouth hid behind the mask.

His forehead began to sweat under the intense light of the operating room. He returned to the body as if it were a source of wonder, almost rediscovering the anatomy he thought he knew by heart. Recalling his years as a dissector student in the morgue chambers in medical school. Thinking, with Beethoven's music, in the memory of his ears, in the pleasure of opening the elastic membranes of the arteries and the beautiful paths of the tendons. While a string quartet played in his head, the smell of formaldehyde accompanied the discovery of the body opened like a unique book without repetition, a book that he could reopen the next day, and the next. Unique but repeatable, like dying and being reborn.

He took out the liver. He removed the kidneys and spleen. They were not hollow organs, but when he opened them, he saw that they had been emptied like the pulp of a fruit, and filled again with earth.

-Let's look at the heart.

Soledad brought it from the table where she had left it. Ibáñez cut it and found the same thing, dirt and clots in each cavity.

"I'm afraid, doctor," she said.

He looked into her eyes for the first time that morning. Tears threatened to fall on the edge of the mask. She is a beautiful woman, thought Mateo Ibáñez, a sensitive woman after all.

-Don't worry. She is nothing more than a case of organ trafficking. Then I'll explain to you.

But he doubted her own words. It was not fear, nor even strangeness, but the feeling of emptiness on an asphalt road that suddenly stops in the middle of a plain and becomes mud, unstable earth after a three-day rain. Something like hesitating to subject the car to such extremes, wondering if the wheels will stall, if he will have to get out and dig in his moccasins to push, or if he will have to call a tow truck from a cell phone. existing in the countryside. Maybe even spend the whole night in the dark in the cold and mud, listening to the radio and with the lights on until maybe the battery died too. It was the restlessness, annoying and irritating, of not being sure of anything other than the possible mistakes of the night.

8

Last night I was thinking about the very opposite versions that the letter originated. I had breakfast and went to the office with the same concern. I tried to avoid meeting my boss. There was no point in talking to my lawyers now, I had never met them in person and I felt ashamed to ask them about something that was turning out to be a very bad joke. At home I started working on what I had come up with all day. I looked for my old high school books. Along with a dictionary I took from the library, I put them on the desk. I decided that it couldn't be that difficult to translate such a short text. I was working most of the night, but I was tired and sleepy. The letters began to fade into a dark brown background, and when I looked up I saw green dots on the walls, sometimes lines like strands of grass.

The next day I went to the office. No worrying memories distracted me, and I was less separated than usual from my companions. I knew that the letter was waiting for me at home, and that in the afternoon I was going to work on it. But at night I started to feel bad. I had nausea, and then the feeling of emptiness in my stomach that was not satisfied by anything I found in the refrigerator and pantry. Then I realized that it came from the uncertainty that the text of the letter caused in me. I managed to translate it, finally, but I didn't understand its meaning at the time. Everything was silent around me, as if the house were an empty desert of sand and wind, even the sun, and that was why it was impossible to ask any questions or even think about them.

Two days later, he had managed to obtain a text of some coherence. It is true that I was surprised by its content, but above all that it contrasted so much with the other versions. In short, there they told me about having been chosen from among a hundred names to receive a unique and unrepeatable opportunity, which I could not miss. Apparently they are a social group, pseudo-religious in my opinion, that offers me a new vision of my life. Nothing is concrete in his speech. First they make a brief reference to their history, naming the plagues and wars in Europe and their role as saviors of souls.

They never talk to me about money, and I also distrust this. However, what attracted me most was his description of the English countryside. I imagined the extensive meadows, always covered in a green as indefinite as it was beautiful. A homogeneous green, interrupted by the shadow of the clouds that pass like slow-moving islands, similar to drifting ships, shadowing the green sea and hiding the sun for moments. And in those spaces of shadow, I could see the hulls of those ships, clean of algae because they were not made of wood, but of steam concentrated in cumulus clouds, in balloons with an enclosed atmosphere. Almost like souls spinning in the air after their detachment. The bases of the clouds had faces that looked at the fields whose greenery they protected from the midday sun, and there I was, looking at them with my head tilted back and a hand on my forehead.

They claim that a place like this could save my life from everyday sadness. They say you just need to imagine it.

9

-Let's trepan, Soledad.

She went to get the box with the hole punch and handed it to him. Ibáñez made two holes in the parietals. Then he sawed the skull into an exact circumference and opened a window in the bones. The brain was intact, at least on its surface. He put his right hand in, detaching the meninges. When he pulled it back, he had dirt on his gloves. He looked at Soledad but he didn't say anything. He continued working and easily took her brain out. Only a fragment remained, perhaps a third of its normal mass, the rest of the skull was occupied by earth.

"This is horrible..." she said.

-Do not panic. They steal cortical cells for neurological patients. We don't have the technology here yet, but they can do it outside and we are suppliers of the raw materials.

Ibáñez did not mention it, however he imagined another body fragmented into dozens of pieces distributed in as many laboratories and clinics capable of paying throughout the world. Another body too familiar, and he rejected the idea like one rejects the edge of a cold knife on the skin.

-But the scars...- he said, surprised. -There are no scars.

He had to find them. He had to shave the entire scalp to look for the slightest holes that could guide him in how the brain had been removed. Only behind the ears did he find a scar that was not recent, but which was the most likely access route.

-It seems like a childhood scar, doctor.

-I know, although it can be hidden with laser scalpels. There are none in the body either, but they had to remove the organs through the posterior route and we already saw that it is the most decomposed area.

Why did they put dirt, he wondered. Perhaps to distract the attention of insurance experts, but organ traffickers do not abandon the bodies, they simply make them disappear. And this time they had imitated the procedure of sects whose rites included findings like these: mutilated bodies with almost no scars.

Ibáñez made long cuts on the legs and arms. Tendons had also been stolen, and the bones had perforations that reached the marrow. Yes, it was what he had thought from the beginning; But why, he wondered, was it so difficult for her to accept his own arguments, as if Soledad's simple and obvious observation were truer than all her wisdom gathered in years of study and experience. As if the bodies were mysteries that he had not yet understood. Masses of mute fabrics that spoke only when it suited them, like capricious children whose mind would never fully penetrate. Not with nails, wicks or hammers. The muteness of the corpses is a silence more atrocious than the silence of the sky or the monotonous stridency of the sea. It resembles the emptiness of nothingness, where not even emptiness can be called that because nothingness still lacks emptiness.

Putting his hands in that body was for him, for the first time in his profession, to touch two fused worlds, two realities that travel parallel and that come together on those frequent occasions but denied to others. Occasions where a dead body, on a dissection table, is penetrated not by metal instruments, but by hands that preserve the vital memory of movement. And those hands were those of Mateo Ibáñez, whose mind was traveling in the third reality of that moment, his gaze fixed on the dying body of his son on sheets stained by secretions. 10

The letter has no farewell, so I considered it an isolated event, an attempt to attract my attention, which would give up if I did not answer. For the next few days I thought very little about all this. My mind did not retain Cintia for long either, and I called her only once without being able to get her to speak to me. After translating the letter I had the urgent need to think about those English fields. I had only seen them in movies, and that's why an image that was always the same and repeated appeared in my memory. But every time I saw the letter on my desk I felt the urge to reread it, and my imagination then seemed to expand. I began to see distant forests beyond the lands, then others immediately within my sight in that landscape without exact perspective. The extension of my fields never decreased, it grew every afternoon I dedicated to contemplating it.

I began to dream about that place, not only imagining it during the day, but it also entered my night dreams, and I no longer know if what I have seen, if every detail and every meter of my land I have recognized while asleep or awake. I am only sure that it becomes irreversibly sharp and clear as the days go by. Especially since I can visualize my own body in those fields, standing in the middle of nowhere or lying on the grass and looking at the sky.

Every morning it is more difficult for me to get up, and I do it with the exact minutes to get to the office. There are days when I can't stand the idea of locking myself in an office with a single window to the city traffic. On the floor above us are the offices of a waste collection company. Sometimes I meet one of the employees in the elevator, and we talk about his brother, an encephalic patient whom he visits on weekends at the nursing home. He's a sad, washed-up guy, and I'm on my way to becoming like him. That's why I look up at the elevator mirror and instead of seeing myself, I see the letter, and behind it the mirror lights up with green spaces.

I don't know if I miss Cintia or my life with her. I hate my job now as much as I haven't since I started. I know I'm not an old man, but I'm almost halfway through my life and I think I've learned everything wrong. The world I am able to perceive seems full of flaws, and sometimes I think my vision is distorting it. I must also admit that I am strange, something like a being who feels closer to a thought than to a reality.

I decided to send a reply to England. I carefully copied the address onto an envelope and wrote the letter in Spanish. I wrote thinking about the English countryside. I think I felt its bright light above my head, and in my legs the sensation of having them spread out on the grass.

I started spending the day away from home. I asked for leave at the office. I haven't spoken to Cintia again either. I received several calls from my lawyer, which I did not answer.

Two have passed weeks. I went back to work. I actually don't mind being in the office anymore. At first I went out because the outdoors helped me imagine the countryside. But then I noticed that there were too many stimuli that ended up distracting me. For days now I have been able to think about my lands within this routine and mechanical environment, with the same voices that I no longer notice because they are so familiar, and serve as a padded path for my imagination.

It's not me, it seems to me. I no longer distinguish my old name from this body that I drag over the green fields. I continue walking with the grass on my heels and the sun on my back, even when I am home and alone. In some ways I enjoy all this, but another part of my mind feels seized by delirium. That's why I have learned not to resist. In an unprecedented way, being there is the only thing that allows me to continue here, walking in my city.

Today I received the answer to my letter. It's a small box that I left on the table, and I went to the office. I didn't forget to stop by the library. When I returned I opened it and prepared the books.

They invite me to their country. They have been gratified by my willing and sensitive attitude. The precariousness of my translation system makes his words ambiguous, or perhaps they were originally ambiguous, I have no way of verifying this. Even when I understand their meaning, the objective they seek continues to escape my understanding. The handwriting this time is more wordy and it occurs to me that it must be from a woman. The grammatical turns are typical of an older woman, but expressed in plural. They invite me to come to their land, and I know that very soon I will own a handful of inherited hectares. But the earth is not inherited, their words say, as if they read my thoughts as I read. One owns the land, always. We come into the world surrounded by it, and wrapped in the substance that feeds it: water. We are mud and the mud will return to our bodies, and the soul will come off as a cloud of hot and suffocating vapor. We must enter the mud for it to enter us. Man and land, like husband and wife.

I think about the detailed description they give of their fields, which is new to me despite all my efforts to ensure that nothing is missing. Then, I could smell the aroma of black earth on the paper. I looked in the box the letter came in and found a small nylon bag. I opened it and several dry clods fell out. That was the aroma that was missing from my imagined painting. A perfume that gives coherence and a story to the objects that I have carefully placed in my landscape.

But above all, I abandoned the idea of my self, whatever the name of my consciousness was. I am in my field, full of green and light, and I feel blind. Lying on the grass, and sighing. I read aloud the phrase that ends the letter, the one that says that I will die in the fields of England.

eleven

-Let's leave this as it is, I'm not going to suture. It must be past noon by now. Send the samples to the laboratory.

Soledad nodded and Ibáñez left the operating room. The doors closed behind him and he entered the locker room. He rubbed his tired eyes. Maybe he'd need glasses starting today, he told himself. In front of him was Minister Farias, sitting on one of the benches in front of the closets. The assistant had just left through the other door.

-Good morning, Ibáñez.

Mateo grunted almost without looking up from the ground. He was irritated and confused, but he didn't pursue the argument he had planned earlier that morning. He began to take off his nightgown and shirt. He grabbed a towel from the shelves above the cabinets. As he wiped away the sweat, he heard Farias ask:

-How about?

Then Ibáñez could not contain his anger.

-Listen to me, this was not urgent, it could have waited until tomorrow or done by someone else.

Farias looked around insistently as if to check that no one else had entered the locker room.

-This guy's ex-wife is the sister of an army colonel. She requested an autopsy when they found him in England. She disappeared from the country a month ago without a passport, and they are looking for flight records, and they will find them.

But Ibáñez was thinking about something else. How could the guy have left the country without a passport, or even taken the body abroad, without someone he knew in the force, perhaps his own brother-in-law. Then he was ashamed of having been so naive. Too attached to books, he had not wanted to look up.

-Now tell me what you are going to write in your report.

Mateo rescued his professional serenity from the bottom where he had sunk it when he met Farias.

- It seems like another case of organ trafficking, extremely professional this time, almost artisanal because of the work they took. They have

simulated the rites of some sects that fill the bodies with earth to dislodge the soul.

"Magnificent," said Farias, with a smile that could not have been wider or more satisfied.

TO Seeing Ibáñez's questioning expression, he commented:

-Now, my friend, we fulfill our duty by establishing that the poor man has been another victim of foreign elements. Your report will be officially recorded and I will endorse it.

Then he placed a hand on Ibáñez's bare shoulder.

-I know about your son, but I also had one who did not live more than fifteen days. And here you see me, still alive and sane.

Yes, Ibáñez thought. It's resentment.

"What we do, my friend, our children suffer," said the minister.

-But what did I do wrong for my son to be sick?

Farias did not answer while he watched Ibáñez point to his chest with his right hand, as if to say me and my fault. Mateo felt in his mouth the true taste of being part of a system. He had put one more brick in the façade wall, primo facto of any form of government, and his own hands had acted even for professional pleasure. He therefore did not even have the possibility of repenting.

He finished changing and left, leaving the door open. He did not look back at Farias. He looked at the clock: half past one in the afternoon. Blas's results should have already been ready. He put the key in the car door, and suddenly he heard Soledad's voice from the entrance of the morgue. He let the afternoon sun adjust his eyes to the reflection on the wall, where her silhouette was like a wax mannequin, beautiful and dead.

He didn't want to listen. He did not want to feel time pass so quickly that not even his own thoughts, with all their burden of piety on their backs, could reach him. But his eyes now clearly contemplated Soledad's eyes, which had greeted him with her brilliance every morning. He could not then confuse the message that he read in them, just as he had read the irreproachable and serene death of that man in the exact and distant place designated for his end. He had smelled that smell in the earth of the corpse, that aroma that was not an aroma, but a call.

-The clinic called, doctor.

Soledad's face left no room for doubt.

ON THE PERPENDICULAR

1

Ibáñez took off his glasses with thin, silver frames, round and somewhat small for his wide, rosy face, with a graying beard that was once red. He rubbed first the base of his nose, straight, medium, then his ears, where the temples of his glasses were too tight, but they were the only glasses he could wear all day without them falling off when he leaned his head on the desk or the morgue table.

He lit a cigarette. The flame of the match illuminated the mustaches slightly dyed yellow with tobacco, and he shadowed his face with the confused shapes of his fingers. His friends saw him blink, but it was inevitable that the brightness of his eyes was revealed by the light of the flame. Not even the red dot of the cigarette dancing in front of his face managed to distract them from that bitterness that Ibáñez was unintentionally expressing.

"Because it's your birthday, we're going to let you smoke your Bensons," Walter said, winking at the others.

They charged him for smoking that brand since he was young. Cigarettes for women, they called him. But he didn't get angry and laughed with them. This time, however, it was an excuse to break the silence that had formed after dinner where the four, almost old men and moderate habits, had done nothing more than eat and drink very little.

The chandelier in Ibáñez's dining room only had two working light bulbs, and from the street came the flickering neon lights of the businesses across the street. The window faced La Plata Avenue on a second floor, and the rain that winter Friday made almost obscene scribbles on the glass.

Mateo approached the window, which he had not stopped looking at since they started having coffee. He sighed deeply and his breath formed an opaque halo on the glass. He drew something with the index finger of his left hand, with which he held the cigarette. His friend Alberto touched him

on the back and murmured something that Ibáñez interpreted as an offer of cognac, or an aperitif, perhaps.

-I don't feel like drinking anything, thank you.

"Honestly, man, this is the saddest birthday I've ever seen," said Ruiz. - We should have hired some girls.

The others smiled but said nothing. They knew that was just a joke. Perhaps they still remembered the parties at the college, the long nights under the fluorescent tubes in the classrooms and the morgue rooms converted into cenacles of private pleasures shared with close friends, never less than intimate. Because only they could understand that someone would toast to life while the corpses waited in the formaldehyde pools, listening with deaf ears to the perfect sound of a woman's voice calling, demanding the meaning of life in those men who carried books instead of books. heads on their shoulders. Until it was no longer necessary cessation of those parties, and the numbers of the escort agencies were lost forever.

Now Ibáñez was fifty-seven years old, and the others were not too far from that age. Walter Márquez, the architect, Dr. Bernardo Ruiz and Alberto Cisneros, the anesthetist. Only three friends remained, and they were enough to hear and see the sadness on his face. That mark that resurfaced from time to time on Ibáñez's round and always impeccable face. And it was not because he had never suffered, but because this time, the beautiful messenger with transparent eyes, the one they call melancholy, and who is little different from her sister, anguish, was looking at him from the bottom of that window, and he even imagined seeing her walk along the sidewalk in front of the building, in the rain and not caring about the light traffic at one in the morning.

-Do you want me to accompany you to visit Blas?

Mateo looked at Ruiz for a moment. He rubbed his eyelids and replaced his glasses. He turned his back to the window and coughed, not because of the tobacco but as a gesture of rebuff. He sat on the corduroy couch that had belonged to his parents. There he reigned as a wise old doctor, an image he liked to project, although he knew he was far from reality. The smoke almost filled the room and he put out his cigarette in the ashtray on the armrest. He lowered the same fabric-covered lid of the couch, hiding several matches and half-finished cigarettes. He had the habit of leaving them halfway, as if he were getting tired of a flavor that he had once found pleasant.

-You have to go sometime, even if he doesn't recognize you.

-I know, but I don't want to see him like that. I'm not ready.

Walter rose from the chair next to the table, which was littered with plates and cutlery, crumpled napkins, and glasses that glistened dully under the chandelier.

-You're an idiot, if you allow me to say so. He is your son, after all, and you did harder things for him.

Mateo looked up and said:

-If you don't have children, you don't understand.

Walter walked away and sat down again. This time it was he who started a Jokey Club that he didn't offer to anyone else. Alberto belched, left the glass of cognac on the table and scratched his thick, black beard despite the years.

"You're a son of a bitch," was the only thing he said, without looking at anyone in particular, only at the ceiling and at that spider that fought with the night so that they wouldn't get lost in the shadows of their own bodies. Because he, Mateo Ibáñez, knew that bodies are less than the water that flows from a tap. The water runs through pipes and returns to the river and then to the sea, but the bodies become shadows, and in it the wind is responsible for carrying away the remains, like those winter winds that are heard at night, in the safety of our bed. , protected by blankets next to a stove. But in the morning, something in the landscape of the world has changed, something is no longer there that was there yesterday, and you feel an emptiness as sharp as the contact of frozen fingers with metal on a frosty morning.

What he thought was safe had irreversibly disappeared. His son Blas was lost on the threshold of madness, in a hospital for the insane. And he knew that from those places he never returns; Although the body returns, the mind is different, and it is so easy to confuse the mind with the soul, as the ancient doctors did, that the difference between being and being becomes more than an abyss, a distance only comparable to life. eternal. Parallels that will never come together, no matter how much they look at each other with strangeness and despair, as one observes a part of the body cut off forever. Mateo Ibañez knew all this, just as he was certain that bodies only persist for a time in formaldehyde, converted no longer into corpses, but into anatomical preparations to live brief eternal lives, miniature models of what God has always promised to too high costs.

The four of them were in their shirt sleeves. Only the architect kept his tie on over his dark blue shirt, his beard neatly trimmed because he had shaved before going to Ibáñez's apartment. Ruiz had his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, his shirt open to the middle of his chest; He was thin and had brown hair, brown eyes in a round face as small as his height. Alberto had two large sweat stains under the armpits of his white shirt, from pants dirty with ash and wine stains. Ibáñez had just now taken off his tie, opening the first three buttons of the silk shirt that Blas had given him on his last

birthday. But he didn't think about this until this moment, then he fell on the sofa and put his head in his hands, while a fly hovered over the remains of food on the table.

-I haven't been to those hospitals for many years. They remind me of a woman I knew when she was very young. She was one of e the first cases I had, and it is difficult for me, I really can't stand, to relate Blas with the memory I have of her. He believed her buried forever, and every time I pass by those places I seem to see the entrance to a cemetery.

"What case was that?" Walter asked.

-He was twenty-five years old, he hadn't even met you yet. They called me one day from the morgue to do an autopsy on a fifteen-year-old boy. I was a trainee, I had only done two autopsies in the last six months. They told me it was routine, because the manner of death was obvious: he had been stabbed twice in the chest.

Ibáñez leaned back and took a deep breath. His tears, if that was what they were, had disappeared. He lit a cigarette again and tossed the packet onto the table. He looked no longer sad, but angry. His light blue eyes shone like two lakes in the rosy tapestry of his face.

He said that he thought, at that time, while he was traveling on the bus to the morgue, that it must have been a street fight. But when he saw the report, he was shocked. He was a normal middle-class boy, and it had been his mother who had killed him with a kitchen knife, after also stabbing his father.

-A large knife, to cut the roast. I went to the dissection table and saw him there naked, skinny like any teenager of his build, with two long, transverse holes in his chest, one below the other, no more than five centimeters apart. The edges of it were ragged, with slivers of the sternum protruding from the skin. The knife had entered between the ribs, hence the transverse position. My God, I thought at that moment, because then I had no experience and I did not imagine what I would see later, that characteristic imprint of humans, that invisible mark that makes us capable of absolutely everything.

"Too pessimistic for my taste, Mateo, we've already discussed it many times," said Walter. -I believe in a single absolute, God, everything else is relative.

-I make correspondences with what I observe, nothing more.

-Your science boasts of not seeing with cloudiness, but it has one eye blocked by skepticism.

-The same as you are skeptical about accepting what makes you uncomfortable. If there is someone in this world who kills his son or his

parents, you and I are also capable of it. I don't let go of that possibility, and I try not to forget it when I kick a table out of anger instead of grabbing a gun.

"But I kept telling," said Ruiz, "I think I once read about the case."

-I did the autopsy, and it was as I told you. The weapon entered between the intercostal spaces directly into his heart. There were two clean blows, and with the first the boy was dead. The rest was routine paperwork. I put my signature and seal on the report and we went to lunch with two colleagues older than me.

But that afternoon, Ibáñez said, getting up and walking around the table, he returned to the morgue because there was a nurse he liked and he had decided to ask her out. He talked to her for a while, invited her to have tea at five-thirty at Harrod's, but she had to go to work at a psychiatric hospital.

-I decided to accompany her. I had finished my work for the day and planned to spend the night with her.

"You were hotter than usual," Ruiz said with a smile so soft that it excluded all obscenity.

The others laughed, but fell silent when they saw that Mateo had an expression of anguish mixed with anger.

"I was a virgin at that time," said Ibáñez, without looking his friends in the eyes. "I was a prissy young man perhaps, too shy too, but now that I think about it, from that time I already knew that sex is as fleeting as the moments it takes us to do it. And disappointment is greater than pleasure when the remains of pity and pain that we suspect in our own are not in the other's eyes.

When they arrived at the hospital, there were some journalists from La Nación waiting at the door. They had taken the boy's mother there to do the tests requested by the prosecution. We passed between them, and the nurse, whose name he no longer remembered, grabbed his arm and guided him to the second floor. She introduced him to her colleagues and told him to wait for her in the dining room, that she would let him know when she finished her shift. Ibáñez looked at the time on his wrist watch: it was three in the afternoon. He walked down the hallway, accidentally peeking into the rooms. The doors were open because they were cleaning. The sick women sat looking at him from their beds, with glassy eyes that stood out in the dull and languid light of the nap. The windows were large, but barred and with thick, old, damp curtains. Chips of peeling paint hung from the ceilings, with large stains around the lamps. One or two women greeted him, and called him doctor, although he did not have a coat or anything to identify him. but he saw To his side, on the left wall, a sign with visiting hours. It

only started at five, so the only man in a suit walking through the hallways had to be a doctor, they would think.

-This idea was floating over my head, I guess. Like those autumn blades that get caught in your hair and you don't realize until someone tells us. But when I reached the end of the hallway, I saw two policewomen standing by a door. At that moment two doctors and a man in a suit, perhaps a lawyer, came out. It was enough to hear them talk a little to know that the woman who had killed her son was there. I stood near the stairs, pretending to be searching for something in my pockets, and glanced out of the corner of my eye into the open room. There she was, sitting on the bed, with the blinds half closed and his hands on her lap. She had her legs crossed, and it seemed to me that she was playing with her fingers, or maybe she was drumming them on her skirt. She didn't seem anxious or sad, nor did she cry or make scenes. I managed to see little else before the door closed. So, when the others left the floor to take the elevator, I turned to one of the guards and said: “Sorry for being late, I'm Dr. Ibáñez, coroner.”

They looked at him almost without expression, and immediately opened the door. Ibáñez saw the woman watching him as she entered, perhaps a little surprised for a second. He parted his lips to say something, although he gave up.

He introduced himself without extending his hand or coming within five meters of her. Now that he was in there, he wondered for the first time why he had acted so impulsively. If he was discovered he would be embarrassed, they would find out at work and maybe he would even deserve two lines in a column in the morning newspaper. But he didn't stop to meditate on this, he didn't have time. Later it would be said that fear and curiosity led him to that room, acting together and in coordination, because it is not true that one prevents the other, but rather that curiosity is the hinge of fear, the gap between the door and the frame to see the truth Later he would also know that something else had dragged him to that place, like thick hands born from the hallway and that distantly resembled the woman's. However, when we sense regret, incipient and inevitable, when we would like to cry like children waiting for someone to come rescue us and tell us that everything has happened, it is already too late.

-I looked into her eyes, and I thought that I couldn't back down anymore like when I was a kid and ran away when something embarrassed me too much to face. She got up and walked to the window. It was a small room, with a bed and two chairs. The white of the sheets was the only thing that contrasted with her black clothes. She was wearing a linen blouse and a silk skirt. When she raised her arms to part the curtains, her figure was marked in front of the window. The blouse stuck to her breasts and nipples, the skirt showed her knees and marked the shape of her buttocks. She must have been over forty years old, I thought at that moment, later she would tell me that she had just turned forty that year. She was mature, and still beautiful. Her hips were somewhat wide, but only enough to show that time had not

only given her experience, but beauty. Her hair, black and slightly wavy at the ends, touched her shoulders. She was wearing it loose, and she jerked as she turned around again.

Sit down, doctor, she had told him. He brought one of the chairs over and she brought the other one and put it in front of her. She sat gently, almost sensually, crossing her legs. Ibáñez looked at the thigh that was peeking out, and she surprised him at that moment. He looked out the window and coughed. He seemed like an inexperienced young man who was introduced to a prostitute for the first time. But she subtly ignored this, and she asked the reason for the visit. His tone was unaffected and he did not appear to be faking. He, too, did not have that absent look of schizophrenics or psychopaths, who, despite his rigorous logic, at some point tend to betray themselves.

“I'm Mateo Ibáñez, ma'am, and I just did the autopsy on his son.”

She moved her eyes in an arc that encompassed the ceiling and the walls, pursed her lips and sighed, like someone preparing to repeat the same argument for the umpteenth time.

“I already told everyone that he was not my son.”

-There was not the slightest trace of sadness, there was no brokenness in her voice or in her eyes, I even think they shone, perhaps excited by the situation in which she was involved. He never denied me the murder, only the identities, which everyone, including me until that moment, believed we knew without mistake.

2

The first time they met was a confusing occasion for both of them. Ana was traveling by taxi to her house after work. It was nine at night and she felt tired . Spring was ending, and sunset had been postponed until after eight. As the car left the downtown area of tall buildings behind, he could recognize in the sky the colors of twilight that he always liked so much. The soft wind coming through the window gave him chills.

Miguel must have already returned from his father's house, he thought. Then, in the interval between two blinks, he saw that figure in the next seat. When he looked again, he had disappeared. She felt dizzy for a few seconds, but she was sure that the tiredness of her eyes had caused that transient image. She forgot the matter as she watched the houses go by, increasingly dark. When she arrived, the mercury lights were the new owners of the streets. She ate dinner alone, looking at the clock from time to time, missing

Miguel's face, who although she hardly spoke to him anymore, was a company. She then changed and began to remove her makeup, and in front of the mirror she suddenly remembered something very precise about that figure that she thought she had seen briefly in the taxi: it was a woman close to her own age.

With her second meeting her fear began. This time she saw everything so clearly that she couldn't doubt it, even though it was absurd to grant her a second of certainty. She had finished dinner with her son, who unlike other times was talking about his father the entire time, and she was already tired of listening to him. She had regretted many times allowing her to visit him after the separation, and now she had reached a stage where she did not dare to forbid it for fear of turning him against her.

Miguel turned on the television after dinner, the shrill voices from the device frightened her. It was in that moment, perhaps longer than the previous time, when she saw that figure again. Not knowing how much time he had spent staring at her, she screamed. Miguel turned around, and she tried to hide the concern that this image so similar to herself had produced, not on the screen of the device, but next to him, to her son. She saw her standing looking at them both, with the same shape as her body, but with another face that she later could not remember precisely. She wasn't even sure what kind of features made her up, just that she was ugly, although she couldn't explain why. She even had the feeling that her own voice had sounded different when she screamed. She got up and walked past Miguel without looking at him, towards her room, listening to the voices and music that had once again absorbed the attention of her son.

For two weeks nothing like this happened again. She had almost forgotten those episodes. One morning she decided to dress up a little more, she wanted to look different in some way, no matter how childish it was to try. She was going to change her hair color and hairstyle. She knew, however, that her son was not going to like it. She didn't remember when the boy had started talking and saying the same things as her father.

When she returned from the hairdresser he was not there, and she went to bed. While she undressed in front of the bathroom mirror, she thought about Miguel's possible criticism, about the abrupt way she had to say the most innocent things, and it was almost like continuing to live with her husband. They looked so similar that it was almost impossible to differentiate their voices over the phone. The gestures and gestures that once made her fall in love with her husband and that she had come to hate years later, were now also in her son. It occurred to her that if Miguel had not been born, her body would not have suffered or been deformed in that way, because since pregnancy she had not been able to recover the narrowness of her waist or the original shape of her breasts. She had given up her youth for her son, her body and beauty that she knew were the only consolation in the face of the dissatisfaction of love. She had given years

and tears for her father, and the only thing she received was criticism and loneliness.

3

-She stopped talking, looked down, fixed her blouse and rolled up her sleeves. She seemed uncomfortable with her own body. She didn't look hot, but her forehead was sweating. She got up and opened the window a little, behind which the bars were the only sign that marked the place where we were.

Ibáñez looked at the clock. Almost an hour had passed without realizing, she had to leave soon. She glanced at the door, as if expecting it to open at any moment.

“I have to go, ma’am.”

“Call me Moira,” she said.

Mateo did not understand. He was sure that he had been told that her name was Ana, and she herself pronounced that name in the story. Suddenly he felt more ashamed than when he entered, she had to get out of there before anyone noticed. It was said that he had the right to make that visit as the victim's coroner, but he knew that they were excuses, not justified reasons. A half-truth is only a lie, he told himself. He walked to the door and touched the handle, thinking that he hadn't asked the question that had brought him there. , the why, the reason, the cause and objective of killing someone, if that someone has also been generated by oneself. She left, thinking about who he would be waiting for in the hallway, already forgetting to greet the woman he was leaving behind. He was Dr. Ibáñez again, tall and with reddish brown hair, a trimmed beard and a gray suit. There was only one officer left at the door. She waved and walked down the stairs. He forgot the nurse who might have been waiting for him, and found himself on the street with the blinding clarity that she always hid the truth from. He thought about the woman's story, about the hallucinations that perhaps were the beginning of all that drama. He would never go back there, it wasn't his job, he insisted on convincing himself as he walked towards his house.

4

"But I imagine you saw her again the next day," said Ruiz.

-Yes, and I spent the whole night thinking about her. I couldn't stop imagining her naked, because the black of her clothes did nothing but show her as she was. I felt miserable for thinking like that when I was the one who had put my hands on the body of the son she had killed in cold blood. I tried to sleep, but it was impossible. I had no choice but to vent against the sheets. It wasn't until dawn that I fell asleep. The next afternoon, I went to the hospital. I introduced myself to the psychiatrists who treated her and they received me cordially. They were going to keep her hospitalized for a week to study her. Then they left me alone and I walked through the hallways, killing time until three in the afternoon.

At that time the hospital seemed dead. The sun came in like a sedative through the squared iron windows. A sun cut into exact doses for each patient, each doctor and nurse or staff in that place. A light that numbed the walls and closed the eyes drawn on the broken plaster and stains on the ceiling. The beds were an extension of the body, and the mind sank into the mattresses to become part of the languor of the afternoon, where even the horns of the street and the noises of the patio became trails of feathers to transport consciousness downwards. , slowly, and lost in oblivion.

-It was as if nothingness took over the hospital at that hour, and in such anonymity I arrived at the door of the room. The officer was asleep in the chair. I opened the door and entered. The woman was lying, with the same clothes, on the still unmade bed in the shadows of the room. She was about to leave when I noticed her eyes were open. Doctor Ibáñez, sit down, she told me, tapping the bed with her hand.

Mateo approached and looked at the window.

“Please don't open it, my head hurts.” She grabbed his hand and made him sit on the mattress to the side. He didn't get up, just tilted his head a little to place another pillow. Ibáñez shivered when he felt her touch.

“You were curious, right, or is it just professionalism? It is rare that a butcher like you is interested in the things of the mind.”

Ibáñez realized that this was true. That woman, just by seeing him, had understood him better than he had understood her with all her story of an hour of it. He was that, a butcher curious and excited by the meat that was made available to him: dead meat. But better was the living flesh that was lying there, capable of giving him chills just by touching it.

Then the strange figure appeared again, not in the mirror but next to her. She was looking at herself, in amazement and bewilderment, smiling in the recognizable way she always had. The sensation was tangible to him that he did not inhabit her body, and her senses received external stimuli. It was as if he were part of another body. But the most disturbing thing was discovering, actually knowing as we know what we know from before her memory, that at that moment her name was Moira, that she had no children and was not married. She was a woman who believed herself to be ugly and unattractive, and who a few years before had gained weight for no reason. Ana was in a body inhabited by a kind of bitter taste and electrical repulsion. Moira's limbs were tense and restless; she kept moving things from one place to another in a house that Ana did not recognize, poor and in bad taste, where the light from the street came in full of humidity and smog. The room was full of objects and decorations of all kinds, placed next to each other without harmony of size or color. There was rough, dull furniture, covered in dust. She thought she saw a rug and an open door that led to a bathroom, she glimpsed a towel with obscene designs. But something attracted her, however, the certainty that this house could only belong to Moira, where no one but her would decide who was going to enter it or with what objects she should adorn it.

But everything stopped suddenly. Ana was in her apartment again, and extreme warmth came from her familiar things. She could no longer think if she was madness or something more like death. Feeling exhausted, she went to her room and ca I was in bed senseless.

6

The woman touched Ibáñez's thigh. She now had her eyelids closed, like the blinds in that room, capable of hiding the sunlight and the secrets behind her eyes. That's why her voice sounded hollow at times, without expression, almost like a chronicler and not a protagonist of her story. But her hand did tremble, or simulated a tremor that seemed real to Ibáñez. The hand went up to his crotch and he felt the beginning of an erection. He immediately got up and backed to the door, looking at the keyless handle. No, he told himself, I can't do it, I shouldn't.

She opened her eyes.

"I've been alone for a long time," and her voice sounded broken in the shadows.

Some rays of the sun entered through the cracks in the blinds and formed yellow freckles on the clothes and sheets. It looked like the negative plate of a tiger photo.

-I can't, ma'am.

-I already told you to call me Moira.

-Excuse me, but I don't think I should come back. I hope the best for you. Good afternoon.

When he went out into the hallway, there was no one there, but he saw one of the police officers coming up the stairs with a steaming cup of coffee.

-Ready for today, doctor? -She asked him.

"Yes," Ibáñez simply said, hoping that the sweat on her forehead and the shine in her eyes in the intense light of the hallway would not be noticeable.

He went down the stairs and walked to his house. He had completely forgotten that he had commitments for that afternoon, an office that he no longer wanted to attend and two visits to the hospital.

7

Mateo went to the kitchen and brought a bottle of fine wine. He uncorked it and his friends looked at him in silence. Walter continued smoking, the other two went to get something to eat.

Ruiz returned and patted Ibáñez on the back.

-Tonight is the night of mistakes, my friend. We will confess our mistakes until dawn. It is the only way to know the cause of failure.

-But error is the origin of truth. We make mistakes because we only want to see clearly even with dirty lenses.

"Sometimes there are no clean cloths on hand, and we almost always have dirty hands," said Alberto.

-So, what to do? Continuously falling into the darkness, perhaps killing the person next to us, because we didn't see him?

Mateo poured the glasses and raised his own. He offered another toast for his birthday:

-Every few years we bury someone, don't we? Sometimes to our previous self, which will not return even if we shout for it, and even disappears from memory like an ungrateful son.

He sat on the couch and burped.

-I'm going to continue counting before I'm too drunk to speak coherently. The night after my second visit I tried to distract the insomnia, which I saw coming at me like a herd of elephants. I wanted to read anything that wasn't about medicine. I was fed up with hospitals, despite having just graduated, and I felt confused by my claim not to cure, but to even understand the purpose of my studies. But at twelve at night I took out from a shelf almost by chance, if I must call the most trivial movements something, even those that make us choose good or evil, a book that I no longer remember the name of. I started flipping through the pages, reading the beginning of each one to see if it interested me. The light from the table next to the bed illuminated and warmed the back of my right hand. The ceiling remained black as the night outside. The car engines on the street began to resemble the roars of fighting animals. Then I read for the first time in my life about the sefirot, those cabalas that define the destiny of man, but that each one is free to take or leave. However, is it possible to choose if the very possibility of choosing is already something agreed upon?

It was three o'clock. Mateo had closed the book and turned off the light. This time he slept, but in his dream Moira and Ana appeared. The two spoke to him at the same time, they both caressed his hair and kissed his chest. One tongue was soft, the other rough. One bit him and another licked the hair on his body. Ibáñez did not wake up until ten o'clock, when the folds of the sheet hurt his skin and his dry throat asked him for something to drink. He had coffee and made some calls to cancel appointments. He was sick, with the flu, he gave as an excuse. And the truth was that he felt like that, feverish, perhaps clouded by a halo of inconsistencies and daydreams. If all the women he felt attracted to were going to be like this, he wouldn't live long, he thought, as he looked out the window with the coffee cup in one hand and the plate in the other, at the traffic of buses and cars, so innocent and harmless compared to humanity.

He let the morning pass without dressing. From the kitchen he looked at the part of his bedroom that could be seen through the half-open door. The sheets hung from the edges of the bed, where a single man had slept, the pillow Ada and the blanket piled on the mattress, loose socks and a pair of underwear forgotten on the floor. Then Mateo felt more alone than in his entire life, as much as he had never been before, because he lacked close friends, because he had no wife, because not even a dog accompanied him, nor did the radio play the music of Beethoven or the Weather forecast. Only the metallic clarity of the morning, the cushioned noise of the engines and the overwhelming silence of his sadness. And he wondered why he only realized today.

Even if she was a murderer, she was a woman after all, different from the others, perhaps destined for him for reasons that were beyond her control. It wasn't love, she told herself, perhaps obsession, or the excitement that lasts a few days and urgently needs to be satisfied. No solitary ritual or replacing the desired object with another would amount to the same thing, not until she was against her body and felt on her skin her forms announced under her clothes.

My God, Ibáñez said to himself out loud, with surprise and helplessness at the same time. Joy and despair in the same sentence that he cried out for someone he did not completely trust, because he did not know how to say if he would not be speaking to the void, so similar to the one that inhabited that room.

At two in the afternoon he got dressed and went to the hospital. He found the same calm that used to be in the afternoons, but when he went upstairs, four doctors were coming out of Ana's room. Two were acquaintances who greeted him as they continued talking. A couple of screams were heard from inside, then the guards came out and stood on either side of the door.

Ibáñez walked down the hallway until he was sure that the others had come down. He returned and saw that they were not the same guards from the previous time.

"I am Dr. Ibáñez, and I treat the lady," he said. It was not his intention to give a different interpretation to his words, but the police must have understood that he was a psychiatrist and let him pass.

Ana was crying with her face against the pillow, while her back moved with moans. They had taken her clothes off and she was wearing a white hospital nightgown. He approached and touched her, she turned around without abruptness.

-You don't know what they did to me, they put devices on my wrists and head, I felt like electricity running through my body. It was horrible!

She hugged Ibáñez's waist, his head against her pelvis, his hands clasped behind her back. She was crying, and her tears wet her shirt and pants. Ibáñez tried to separate him from her, but he couldn't or wouldn't, so he started caressing her head. She seemed as vulnerable as a child who has been excessively punished for trivial reasons. Her hair gave off a smell of disinfectants, of cotton wool with hydrogen peroxide. It was beautiful to be like this, Mateo thought, alone with a woman who needed him as much as she needed air, sitting at his feet and hugging him like a god, in a darkened room and far from the world that he felt out there as something dispensable.

But she then placed his mouth on her crotch. Mateo was not surprised, the contact of his face had already begun to excite him. He looked at the

door, separated from Ana and jammed a chair against the handle. He returned to her and hugged her. They both lay on the bed, him lifting her nightgown, she opening the buttons of her shirt. They didn't get completely naked, they had only taken off what was necessary to feel that one's body was the other's body.

She moaned with a whisper in her ears. She licked and bit his earlobes, she pressed her nails on Mateo's back. He kissed her desperately, as if all human experience had filtered through the intricate web of her consciousness to help him enjoy what would never be repeated.

“Moira,” he murmured. And she laughed as she heard him pronounce her real name for the first time. “Moira,” she repeated several times until her panting reached what the human heart is capable of, and then she slowly calmed the rhythm of her heartbeat. He said her name again while he continued breathing on her and feeling the humidity of their bodies that joined them as if they were underwater.

"You said my name seven times," she said.

Ibáñez pulled away, suddenly, when he thought about the book he had read the night before. This was the third time he had visited her, and he had said that name seven times. Numbers that he had never believed in and that were now presented as cabals. He looked at her from the side. Somehow she had rejuvenated, or at least that's how she seemed to him.

-She had been alone for so long. Ana had everything I wanted. Beauty, a husband and a son. Exquisite taste in choosing her clothes and her things for the house. There were times when I thought I deserved to have them too, then I resigned myself to the fact that I could only get them by stealing them. But the barrier that separated us was almost i impossible to break. And the anger that was born when I realized it was the knife that tore the fabric and opened the space that made me see Ana's life as if through a microscope, within reach of my hands. But the things I touched broke, so I told myself: if I can't have them, neither can she.

8

Two months had passed since the last meeting, and Ana ended up accepting that everything had been a temporary crisis. But when that vision of hers surprised her again one morning as she woke up in her bed, as if her entire past life had been nothing more than a dream, she didn't feel too surprised. She now inhabited Moira's body, and she knew that she was a woman full of tragic memories, of resentments that caused her back pain

and the sensation of having slept with her hands and legs tied. Although she could not understand the strange aesthetics of that world at first, there was no doubt about the overflowing feeling of fury in Moira's body.

Her new experience caught her in the sweet shop where she was having lunch. She had learned to be more attentive during those states, and she realized that Moira was scared too. They both looked at each other's bodies, as if they were sitting at adjacent tables in the same dining room. Ana looked at the mirror three meters away, which appeared to double the size of the room. There was Moira, obese in the hips, with dyed and untidy red hair, with strands that hung from the nape of her neck and forehead with an ambiguous intention of elegance. She had put on excessive makeup, with intense rouge, carmine on her cheeks and blue on her eyelids. Her face was obtuse and furious, grotesque every time she opened her lips to eat a slice of cake and drink a glass of cheap wine. Then Ana felt the sour taste of old wine in her mouth. She looked at her own plate and saw the cake, then she looked up again at the mirror. Moira was watching her. The eyes of each one on the other's face. Ana moved her lips to speak, and Moira did the same, exactly, and she no longer had any doubts about it, even though a vertigo threatened to make her faint right there, in the middle of people who seemed to exist more in mirrors than in reality. The young men passed by without noticing the incongruity, the pale complexion on the ruddy face, the trembling hands whose bracelets danced and jingled without attracting the attention of others. She was looking at herself, not at Ana, but at Moira, but she continued thinking like Ana, while the feeling of fury began to invade her as if from a muddy floor. It was something like an exchange of strangely intertwined spaces, she told herself. A timeless bond perhaps, because when they both looked at the clock on the wall, they noticed that time was not passing. That was why no one around her discovered the grotesque and painful faces that Moira made with Ana's face, mocking her from the back of the room. There was her own body, next to the toilet door, in a distasteful position that she would never have adopted. It was grotesque to see herself acting like a drunk in an elegant room, exposed to the disapproving glances of others. No one had ever spoken ill of her, no one had been ashamed to be by her side, except her husband and her son. Ana's anguish was outlined on Moira's face. He would have liked to hurt her now that he was in her body, and yet at the same time he realized that Moira's body was a refuge and a disguise, like the one used by someone who wants to escape without being recognized, or who is willing to fulfill their dreams. unconfessed desires with the name and face of another.

When it was all over, her own body was sore and tired, and Ana realized the vulnerability she had exposed. The other was aware of her life and her family, but she had been unable to discover anything other than a state of unapproachable loneliness and permanent despair in Moira's body. She tried to remember where she had seen that face before. Maybe on the streets of the neighborhood, or the supermarket, but it was impossible to know. So

many people with whom you barely exchange a glance or a touch of clothing can turn into nightmares.

In the following meetings they established a kind of fight in which each tried to harm the other's body. Ana felt exhausted afterwards, and more irritable than usual. One day when she returned from work, she found Miguel and her father talking in the kitchen. She tried to avoid the usual argument with her husband, but found it impossible to overlook her passive and unambitious nature. He had always insisted on being different from what Ana wanted, he listened to her but had never paid attention to her when she talked about seeking the extreme quality of life that she thought should be obtained. The invariable idea of mediocrity was the definition of her husband, with a serene and even rarely happy lack of ambition, but mediocrity nonetheless.

That night they fought because

He had not warned her of his visit. Miguel locked himself in her room, angry, and her husband left. Ana resented the boy because he was not able to see the difference between them. Miguel had become a man almost as pitiful as his father.

Meetings with Moira continued to become a habit. Moira spoke disparagingly to her, insinuating that her husband and her son were plotting against her. Ana tried not to listen to her, but she had already exhausted the few resources she knew to silence her. Moira mocked her weakness.

“Your husband is going to take Miguel forever,” she told her, calling her stupid.

Now the encounters happened at any time and place, they lasted as long as a dizzy spell and she returned from them dizzy and confused, unsure of her name. She heard voices, sometimes the sound of a distorted radio playing the loud music Moira liked. She would then go in search of a mirror or a window to make sure where she was, not the place of her body in space, but in which body.

A week later, she returned home and looked in the mirror by the door as she locked it. For a moment she thought she saw Moira. She immediately heard the voices of Miguel and his father, who had returned again without asking permission. They laughed and their voices sounded happy over the sound of the television. But Ana felt panic because this time Moira had clung to her body even more tightly than usual. She made an effort to speak to him, but Moira ignored her. She went to the kitchen looking at the clock, which this time had not stopped. Somehow Moira had found the perpendicular where her paths were going to converge sooner or later, like in a corner of a dead city. Always so close to her, that she had not known how to see her. She must have planned everything so that her lives were equal: to cancel the difference it was necessary to remove.

She came to the kitchen and asked Miguel to come out.

-Will you do me the favor of going to pay the taxi driver, dear?

When she was alone with Ana's husband, she opened a kitchen drawer and took out a knife. He continued watching television, willing as usual to remain silent so as not to argue. Moira came up behind him and stabbed him in the back.

Ana thought for a moment she was back in control of her own body. Seeing Miguel's eyes looking at her with the gun in his hand, she knew she was wrong.

Afterwards, it no longer seemed strange to her that she wanted to kill the boy too when she saw him cornered, shouting:

-No, mom, please!

But she demanded that he call her by her name, which everyone should use from then on.

"My name is Moira!" She said, stabbing the knife into his chest twice. - My name is Moira!

9

After finishing listening to her, Ibáñez got out of bed and buttoned his pants and shirt. His hands were shaking and confusing the buttons. He looked at Moira as if at any moment she was going to attack him, because she was still lying on her back, naked, moving her arms back and forth as if she had a dagger in each hand, hitting her thighs. But she didn't scream, she just murmured her name continuously.

“My God,” he thought, “what did I do?” He looked at his hands and rubbed his face. He spit out the taste and Moira's saliva. It was a creature of man, he told himself, a monster more horrible than the one on the bed, which in the end was still as beautiful as everything terrible and definitive.

10

Ibáñez was surrounded by his three friends. He sitting in the center of the dining room, they standing a short distance away. They had left their glasses on the table, and one of them was listening to him with his hands in his pockets, another with his arms crossed, and the third playing with his beard.

-I felt like killing her. I threw myself on top of her and put her hands on her neck. But then she looked at me in a different way. This time there was sadness, and then I realized that it wasn't Moira who was looking at me. But it wasn't an innocent look either, not even sweet, but full of horror for what had happened, perhaps for what he had allowed to happen. Resentment and fury open paths and tear the veils of ignorant shadows. Sometimes the desires that virtue hides in the night are as deformed as those that evil shouts in broad daylight.

"But Mateo, you're not going to tell me that you believe in cabals, that Gebura and Tifferet were in those women," Ruiz said.

Ibáñez looked up at his friend. He had tears that he didn't try to hide, and an expression of reproach that Ruiz would not forget.

-Did you not understand anything I said? Did no one understand a damn thing I just said? Don't you realize that they weren't the good and the bad, but one? They were both Gebura.

None of the three had seen Mateo Ibáñez speak that way. They had known him for more than twenty years as a skeptic. Ibáñez had always doubted everything, even the suspicious sim complexity of the facts.

"But Mateo," Walter said, putting a hand on his shoulder. "You never told us you believed in these things."

-I don't think so. I am a doctor, as I was at that time, and I told them what I saw just as I have been writing my reports for as long as I can remember, with complete sincerity.

He rubbed his face and looked at the clock on the wall. It was half past three. The aroma of wine was flying locked in the dining room. He went to open a window and the cool night air moved the curtains. The ashes flew but the butts remained in the ashtrays.

-I think it's time to go to sleep. If you want to spend the night here, I'll bring you some blankets and you can lie on the living room rug.

They nodded. Tomorrow would be a holiday and they could get up later. Ibáñez went to his bedroom and rummaged through the top of the closet. I don't know why I told them all that, they didn't understand me, he thought, How could they understand the way in which the worst of each person sprouts like corn in the middle of the field and under the most splendid sun of the year. That evil can be harvested as the best and most abundant

harvest of life, so much so that our hands cannot cope and the piles hide our sight as we walk the path to the silos. And the seeds remain in the nails, and we sow death in each plowed furrow, until the field that we proudly contemplate is a field of green and tasteless fruits, with leaves wide but hard as leather, and they are plants that never die.

He looked at the portrait of Blas on his nightstand. A photo from when he was little and had emerged unscathed from the transplant. His smile was the same as when the boy had graduated as a doctor, posing next to his father in a photograph from three years ago. But he had broken it, because he did not want to remember that his son had let a patient die. Mateo Ibáñez, forensic eminence, did not forgive negligence. Dr. Ibáñez had enough pride not to tolerate crazy people and murderers in his family.

He returned to the dining room and threw the blankets that he had carried like bundles, like bundles of corn, onto the floor.

-Here you go, guys. If you want to use the bathroom, please don't leave it dirty for me. Good night.

"Mateo," Alberto said, "What happened to the woman?"

-They told me that she died in the hospital ten years later. They treated her for schizophrenia but she never showed improvement. Some heard her simulate voices when she was alone. Well, I'm tired of talking about this. Also, tomorrow I have to get up early to go to Blaise's.

They looked at each other strangely.

-I know what I said before, but I can't hold it anymore after tonight.

She went to her room, opened the windows and turned off the lights. The smell of cigarettes and wine filled the pillow and sheets. He knew she wouldn't be able to sleep, but he no longer wanted to see the pitying faces of her friends. That was also her character, the isolation in the face of what she knew in advance was a failure.

A mosquito landed on his right hand on the pillow. The hand that explored and read the bodies, just as his eyes today read the neighborhood at night and his ears guessed the origin of the noises in the street. The same hands that found the truth in dead bodies had lost their beauty and all right of atonement one afternoon many, too many years ago. Because there is no redemption for those who, after touching the virgin corpse of a boy, touch the body of nameless shadows.

WHERE THE SOULS OF CHILDREN GO

1

There's someone here with me. I feel him breathing with a breath that does not seem, however, to be the breath of a human being. I don't want to open my eyes yet, and I also know that even if I wanted to I couldn't do it. I prefer to fall asleep in the memory that comes like waves crashing onto the beach without letting me move forward. As if the waves were pious warnings, the last words before the deep sea.

I remember listening to Mom and Dad's argument all day. After lunch she began to lift the plates from the table, while she reproached my father for the things he had done and the things she never finished doing. She was always the same. She would wake me up with my mother's voice talking in the kitchen while they drank mate, and my father's voice, slow and somber, answering in monosyllables. At first I thought they were dreams, because her voice had the exasperating quality of monotony. That tense rope of sound that keeps us on the threshold of consciousness, that voice that does not allow us to go anywhere until we finish hearing it, like Ariadne's thread but with a knot that not even the gods could untie.

Dad lasted all afternoon. Then he protested too, raised his voice several times and insulted Mom many more times. But she was cold as hi elo. He cried very often, but he only achieved what the shepherd in the old children's story who gave false warnings about the wolf: when it really happened, no one paid attention to him. She would leave the house knocking on the doors, and she would make me accompany her as if I were her shield, sometimes she would even lay me down next to her in the double bed so that dad wouldn't bother her. And in the darkness I listened to her protests against him as if she were trying to sow in me the seed of a hatred that perhaps she didn't even feel, but that I would believe was her duty to reap in me years later.

Last Sunday night dad left home. I didn't see him leave, I only heard the car engine. He would return shortly after, I thought. I could not even imagine his absence for more than a day, it was not possible according to the rules that had governed my life until then, the family and the house, both forming a framework so stable that there were no breaks or tears that

could not be sewn. , even if they left marks or roughness, which in the end also constitute memories. I can understand this very well. Because I am twelve years old, and I look back at my life, which crashes against me as if I were a car that has braked abruptly.

2

Ruiz looked up from the ground. Sweat fell from his forehead and face, it ran down his neck and wet his shirt. The leather of his moccasins was stained with blood and the soles were full of mud. They weighed him down as he peeled them off the uneven ground around the tracks. There was almost no asphalt in one hundred square meters, only at the level crossing a pavement that was more than twenty years old, battered and broken by the incessant traffic of trucks and buses.

The train was stopped in the middle. The locomotive more than two hundred meters away, the closest it had been able to stop, the tail at the end of perhaps ten or fifteen other cars. Ruiz listened to what was happening on the other side. The fire engines, the provincial police patrol cars, the cars that arrived and were diverted, the screams of relatives, the horns, the hum of the tow trucks that were just now arriving.

They had spent two hours searching for survivors. He was more than twenty meters from the train, and even there they continued to find children's clothes, school moccasins, remains of overalls. But what he was looking for were bodies, and he had the incredible, virginal confidence that he would find some alive. That's what he was for, he was a doctor and not a mortician. And under the sky overcast by storm clouds, the ecstatic air full of electricity on that fourteenth hour of a Monday in November, there were many things he found in the mud, between the tracks and under the structure of the train, but it was when he lifted shoe laces still tied to a leg fragment when a bone splinter stuck in a toe. He didn't feel pain, only a lump in his throat, as hard as the cord he tried to untie, because he was so wet it was impossible. His hands were shaking, dirty. The others didn't look at him. He who looks at the ground in search of the past misses the present, he said to himself. He managed to untie the knot at the end, loosened the lace, took off the shoe, slid on the stocking with the Citadel brand stamped on the label, and freed the foot. A small foot of a perhaps ten-year-old boy, whose sole was kept clean and with traces of talcum powder that his mother must have put on it after bathing. But above the ankle there was nothing but a bone exposed and broken like a chopped log.

God is an inexperienced lumberjack, thought Dr. Ruiz.

3

Mateo stopped the car in front of the police cordon.

"I'm the coroner," he said to the officer who approached his window.

-Last name?

"Ibáñez," he answered, watching the policeman consult the list that had been prepared for him perhaps only ten minutes before. Then he saw that he gave him the silent sign of permission, and he advanced. The white ribbon with red spiral stripes fell under the wheels of the car, and only then did he realize what memory they brought back: the luminous spirals in front of children's hair salons. He saw the sirens of the patrol cars turn in silence, overshadowed by the noise of the tracks that moved the metal debris, those remains of the bus that had been scattered over two hundred meters, away from the tracks or next to the bars that separated from the parallel street, others crushed under the first cars or consumed by fire when the gasoline tank exploded. The burning smell was not unpleasant at first, Ibáñez liked that aroma that somehow represented the zero point after a fire, the inherent white beneath the black of combustion. But he didn't like it when water interfered with the process, not even the threat of water as was happening now. It was soon going to rain, and the unbearable humidity was accelerating the decomposition of the corpses and preventing the charred bodies from drying as nature deems proper.

He had not seen the dead yet, but after the capar steel door of his Fiat, with the scent of his newborn son still intact in his nose, and the memory of his wife sleeping peacefully in the hospital bed still fresh in his memory, he imagined the scene of the accident with more details than the that I actually saw. Because today he felt immune to death, like a chaplain who blesses fallen soldiers with his miter and holy water.

Then he heard the screams, closer as he advanced toward the tracks. His heart skipped a beat when he saw the hands and face of a woman on the closed right side window of his car. For a moment he thought he had hit her, but after her a man, perhaps her husband, pulled her away from her by grabbing her waist, and almost lifting her into his arms, he carried her to an ambulance. She was wearing a moss green raincoat and had her hair messy, but Ibáñez would later remember her because of her face and her expression of complete terror.

He couldn't continue anymore. She got out of the car and was greeted by a light drizzle. He walked toward the train over the mud that covered the old pavement. He avoided the metal splinters and glass scattered throughout the property, fragments that could have gone through the soles of his boots. She had been called shortly after the accident, and she had dressed carefully for the scene, tall black rubber boots, a dark blue raincoat with a hood, baggy pants, and a white shirt. Ibáñez felt young and strong for his work, like a warrior with shield and armor, a helmet under his left arm ready to be placed, and a spear or crossbow in his right hand.

"Who are you?" a police officer asked him. His uniform was torn in the sleeves and shoulders; he must have been crouching trying to remove corpses from between the irons. The policeman took off his gloves, his hands were full of blisters.

"I'm the coroner," said Ibáñez.

The policeman no longer paid attention to him, busy pressing his sore hands against his body. Ibáñez continued walking toward a group around the locomotive, but someone called out to him. He looked around without discovering who.

-Here, on the other side of the train!

Mateo knelt down and looked underneath. A man was motioning for him to turn around. He took a long detour around the remains of the school bus. Nothing remained of the orange sheet metal but twisted burnt iron. In some fragments you could see a letter or read a syllable of the label on the sides, but the rest were pieces of seats, rubber mats and metal bars. There had been children sitting there, looking out the windows and holding on to those once firm bars. Sure of those irons that they believed were as eternal as their lives.

He saw the man twenty meters away, waving at him with one arm raised. That side of the tracks was different. There were no rescue vehicles or people standing in the way, just a few men looking down at the ground, searching for what Mateo already knew. But their appearance was far from that, rather they looked like exhausted peasants digging the ground in search of vermin. The dead are not always food from the ground, Ibáñez told himself, sometimes the bones hurt the bare feet of the peasants and cause infections. Sometimes the dead demand company.

He reached the other, who extended a dirty hand with dried blood. But Ibáñez avoided touching him when he saw that with his other hand he was throwing something into the distance, something that looked like part of a broken doll.

-I'm Dr. Ruiz, doctor. I heard him show up with the police a while ago.

-From far away and with the noise of the cranes?

-I have very good hearing, doctor. I'm an amateur musician and I hear notes that people miss.

They both looked at each other for a moment and then turned to look at the landscape. On one side of the train there was a small mountain of objects covered in mud and fabric.

-We haven't found survivors yet, but I hope to find some within what was most complete of the micro-commented Ruiz.

Ibáñez looked at him, incredulous. How could a doctor who was there, in the middle of the disaster, still speak that way? Suddenly, Ruiz appeared to him as a strange figure with that melancholic smile, his skinny body, and his thoughtful gaze. But he discovered that the other was also looking at him curiously.

-If you allow me to ask you, what are you doing here, doctor?

-They told me about the accident. They want me to do an autopsy on the driver. They think he was sick or drunk, something the insurance can evade. I decided to see the scene myself.

-This concern is not common in a laboratory doctor, doctor.

Ibáñez did not ignore the offense.

-Do you call the dissection room a laboratory? To the scalpel and the saw? I would call it a workshop, Dr. Ruiz.

Ibáñez turned his back on Ruiz and began to walk along the road. Then he came back and asked:

-Does anyone know anything about the ca uses?

-I heard that the bus stopped. Maybe it had a breakdown. Some neighbors say they saw the driver force the gear lever. The boys tried to help him. People say that he heard the desperate screams of the boys, but the train was so close that...

-No one could do anything, I imagine.

Ibáñez walked towards the pile next to the train. He lifted the cloths and the flies were scared away, but others returned to settle on the bodies. There were burned torsos, full arms, feet with shoes, overalls enveloping loose head shapes. The stench was sweet, so sweet that it did not seem like the smell of the dead but the perfume of cemeteries full of flowers.

"If the driver had checked the engine before leaving..." Ibáñez said. It was an old vehicle, right?

-A renovated bus for school bus, the cheapest that a middle class school can buy. But if we go to the yes, doctor, we would never finish posing

hypotheses. God has already thrown his dice, and knowing the cause is beautiful but useless wisdom.

It continued to drizzle, and the cranes continued their work. They had cleared the north side of the tracks, but they had to wait for the slow digging of the shovels and the removal of the fragments. Ibáñez put a hand on Ruiz's shoulder.

-Do you believe in God, doctor? And if he plays dice, how is he different from us? I too can throw them away and call myself God.

-I believe in the imperative of facts.

-And if right now, next to us, the tracks were free and the train had continued on its way, and the bus had crossed the tracks and the kids were in their homes...

-If it didn't rain and there was sun... That is hope clinging to fantasy.

-I call your idea of finding someone alive a fanciful hope. I'm talking about self-defense, the way to walk through this place without losing your mind.

Ibáñez heard his name from the other side. He bent down and saw a firefighter demanding him.

-We found the driver's body, doctor!

-Take him to the ambulance! I follow them to the morgue in my car.

Then he stood up and extended his hand to Ruiz, he had forgotten that he had not shaken the one the other had offered him before. Ruiz showed him his dirty palms again.

-It doesn't matter, doctor. It was an honor to get to know him.-And he shook her hand.

"If it hadn't been for the accident we wouldn't have met..." Ruiz said, but there was no cynicism in his tone, but rather a clumsy offer of mutual trust.

4

It was nine at night when Mom and I were alone. Like every Sunday, I took my weekly bath. This time she didn't ask why it had taken so long, I went out in my pajamas and found the dinner table set. Mom came up to me, knelt down and adjusted the buttons on my jacket. She had cried, the circles under her eyes were visible, and I imagined her making those quick Sunday

dinners that routine had made me hate: fried eggs and popsicle and cheese sandwiches. Food without care or concern, food to say goodbye to the weekend, made with the little desire that the idea of a new work day offered. But at home the sadness of Sunday was added after the usual arguments, the shadow behind the halo of light of the summer afternoons.

The sound of the television echoed off the walls of the pantry, with its orange and white striped wallpaper. The light from the lamp was also typical of Sunday night, intense but bitter, a light permanently threatened by the approaching hour of Monday, the clock with the alarm set for six in the morning, waiting on the bedside table in the bedroom. , like a monster or a big sleepy mouth without teeth. The danger was not death but perdition, complete loss in the dark passage of working days, at the end of which the battered and stinking corpse of another Sunday awaited.

Mom came up and said:

-Now you are the man of the house and you have to help me.

That was the first time I realized what she had done. I always defended her. I repeated to myself the arguments she used: dad who was late, who didn't do what he should do, who didn't earn enough money, dad this and dad that. But mom's voice was the only one present, always. Even the most loved music can be hated when it is played at the wrong time.

"She left because of you," I answered.

She then took out her anger on me. She walked over to the table, picked up my untouched plate and threw the contents into the trash. I felt like tears were going to come soon, but a lump in my throat stopped me. I never liked crying in front of others, I had only done it silently in my room.

"Go to bed," she told me, but she continued talking to me, going back and forth from the kitchen to the bedroom door. I turned off the light, covered myself with the sheets and tried not to listen. However, there are voices that leave their sound in the mind like bells. They continue so floating in dreams and wakefulness, in the middle of a deserted road or in a crowd.

And I didn't feel guilt, but a lot of anger.

That's why, this morning at school, I sat on the last bench and avoided my classmates. I became engrossed in the math test, trying to decipher calculations that were impossible for me to perform, square roots, theorems or fractions. Numbers that floated on the windows that overlooked the playground. There where the bell launched its lacerating challenge, the edge that shortened the deadline for an exam for which there was no resolution. My God, I thought, I don't know what Mom is going to do when she sees the zero in red at the top of the exam sheet.

The kids got up one by one and handed the tests to the teacher's desk. There were few of us left, sitting. She watched us impatiently, the others were playing in the yard, running around, while I used the extra time and missed my recess. I finally gave up. I think I was pale, but I decided not to cry. I handed in the sheet and saw the teacher's disapproving face. That's what I see in them all the time, mom's dazed face.

I went to a corner of the patio and sat holding my head in my hands. I thought about Dad, if he had come home, where he had slept, or if he would see him at night. I went back to class and endured the jokes from my classmates. They stole the food I was carrying, but I didn't say anything. They got ink on my folder, and I stayed silent.

The teacher came over and put a hand on my forehead.

-Do you feel okay? You're haggard.

I nodded my head yes and walked away, throwing the books on the floor, but no one noticed anything more than innate clumsiness. The others laughed, even the teacher.

-Okay, okay, I'll leave you alone...

And so it was that noon came, and then twelve-thirty and the final hour of school. We leave the classroom and form. We lowered the flag from the mast with the usual quick ceremony. They opened the doors. Those of us who return home on the school bus must wait in another line on one side, pressed against the walls of the lobby while the kids from other grades leave or wait for their parents to come pick them up. My house is not far away, I think it's almost twenty blocks from the tracks. I'm the last one up early in the morning and the first one down on the way back. I think I'm like a milestone on our itinerary, when I go up the kids look at me with displeasure, thinking about how close it is to get to school, when I go down, I haven't had time to talk to them. That's why I almost always sit at the back of the bus, next to the left window to watch the older girls who leave school after us go by. That's what I do now, and I wonder if they too will one day be like mom.

I open the window to let in the breeze. It's hot and cloudy. I wait for the rain like I wait for dad. I wish he was back tonight. But how to spend the day with that doubt. I look everywhere, however he is not waiting for me on the street. This would at least give me the assurance that he misses me, that he wants to talk to me. But if he didn't come it's maybe because we're going to see each other later at home. Yeah, so it's a good sign he's not here, I tell myself.

The microphone is going to start. The driver has closed the door, but is having trouble starting the engine. I hear Don Oscar's protests. His gray sweater has two large sweat stains in the armpits, and another larger one on his back. Plump and almost bald, his voice is thick like that of an opera

singer. But his voice knows nothing but insults, which earns him reprimands from the director. We just do not care. We learn from him what should or should not be said in case of rage. And I am attentive to his words. I have thought them many times at home, many times on the street, and I mentally practice obscenities.

We shook with a rattle and a rhythmic sound of worn valves. A column of smoke coming out of the exhaust pipe surrounds the left side of the bus when entering second gear. But soon we have to make way for the kids who cross in the middle of the block and then we stop at the red light. Some greet us, two teachers say something to Don Oscar. One of them is my teacher, and I crouch down so she doesn't have the opportunity to reproach me with her eyes. When she has the result of the exam she is going to see mom. I know what's going to happen.

And without thinking about it, I nudge one of my companions. He's been bothering me all morning and now he's coming over to pull my coat, laughing like a retard. I realize that I have been enduring his pushing while I thought about dad, the women and the teachers, at the same time looking at Don Oscar's back as he tried to start the bus.

Pablo looks at me angrily, covering his chin with one hand. I broke a tooth, maybe. He throws himself on top of me and the others come to separate us. But it's already late. Yes His dirty hands pull my hair and my coat, and I feel his saliva on my face. She says something, but her braces don't let her insult clearly. The bus remains stopped, even when the green light came on. I hear the horns. I just stretch my arms to protect myself. Pablo looks like a puppy trying to scratch and bite. He is no bigger than me, and his movements are clumsy. Then Don Oscar's voice and hands interrupt the fight.

-But stop making a fuss, motherfucker! It's been a week since I have had a guard or a teacher to take care of them while I drive!

He looks at me for a moment, but he immediately lifts my partner by the arm almost to his height. Pablo cries and screams for me to put him down. The others look at him as if he is about to rip their arm off. Then he drops him on the seat and grabs my hand.

-I came here.

He takes me to the front and says:

-Sit down and stop provoking others.

I fall into the first seat behind the driver. I look at him in the mirror, and he glances at me. He doesn't say anything else, but I would like to ask him what I did, other than sitting like always and looking out the window. Sometimes I think that the world is a great fiction that everyone acts for me. That there is something bigger that everyone is hiding from me, something

that everyone whispers so that I don't hear. Just as behind the facades of houses there are rooms that one never imagined, people's faces seem to me like lies created to keep me isolated. I'm not old enough, they would tell me if they could confess the farce, nor am I smart enough to understand. That's what mom says, because my grades are far from the best. They are barely correct, notes worthy of the pile, numbers in a notebook of executions. Everything flows like water and disappears like it, and yet everything hurts more than boiling water. It is the same as the acid used to unclog pipes, so strong that it eats away at the skin and would leave us blind just by perceiving its vapor. That's why every word hurts me.

I think about this when I see the driver's back. I would like to ask him what I did to make him talk to me like he did just now, I who so much wanted to be like him, strong and sure of himself, a man who is already a man despite all of his defects. But I remain silent, and look at the railroad tracks we approach. The barriers are low, shaking a little in the rain, and the yellow and black stripes play a mirror dance with the fog and puddles on the pavement. There is a red light on the side, like ambulance and police sirens. But it's dead, off I mean. I stare at her as we stop in front of the level crossing, and I keep thinking about what will happen at home right now, behind these tracks that now separate me from her.

5

God is a tall, burly man walking down a gravel path. He wears black corduroy pants with cuffs tucked into his boots. He has a sleeveless, collarless, brown leather jacket, unbuttoned in the front. He walks somewhat clumsily because his left sole is broken and tied with a rope, the pebbles from the road get between his fingers and from time to time he has to stop to remove them. His left arm swings at his side, except when he has to adjust his sole. His right arm is raised over his shoulder, holding the handle of an ax whose blade shines in the late afternoon. The man has his head bowed, as if looking at his chest with curly hair, but who knows what he is really looking at, because his eyes are half-closed, although we guess they are brown like his short beard and curly hair.

He sometimes raises his gaze to the front, but he does not seem to see more than the base of the trunks, he does not even glance at the greenery that hides in the darkness like the sun does behind the line of the earth. Man will not waste his gaze on what is useless, he knows that nothing can be rescued from darkness. His steps slow, then resume his speed. They turn a little to the right, towards a row of trees that appear to have been planted deliberately, because they have grown in two parallel lines. The woodcutter stops in front of the first log. He looks at him now with absurd attention. His

eyes, we realize only then, are idiotic. They are the eyes of a big child who understands nothing, who knows that the ax is there to cut the trunk, but perhaps he forgets to pick up the firewood and then take it to burn in his home.

He sets his boots firmly on the ground, sinking a little into the mud between the roots sticking out of the ground. He is in front of a young tree, the diameter of the trunk is no larger than the woodcutter's body. He takes up the axe, raises his arms and brings the blade down on the bark. He does it again and again, but he doesn't make much progress. He bruises the surface cruelly without advancing too far. Instead of changing the angle of the blade, he always gives the same ax blow with the side that is perhaps less sharp. If a veteran woodsman saw him at this moment, he would hit him on the head and push him away, angry and disillusioned with that clumsy apprentice.

However, we know that there is no one else in this forest. The woodcutter is neither young nor too old. He has been the owner of these lands since always, since he can remember, although this is precarious and fails at times, confusing the times, the paths and the trees that he must cut.

Ruiz heard the sound of the ax coming from twenty meters in front of him. They were the firefighters opening the remains of the bus, which was still smoking in the drizzle. And between the blows he heard a noise that grew very quickly among the splashing over the puddles and mud. The rain stopped, but a stinging curtain still fell like needles of salt.

"Doctor Ruiz!" someone shouted from the surrounding crowd.

-Doctor Ruiz!-several voices called for him again.

He ran there along with other rescuers, police and firefighters in raincoats, parents in shirt sleeves, with their hair stuck to their foreheads and their clothes soaked.

Dr. Bernardo Ruiz made his way between them. He stepped on fragments of iron, tripped over others and cut his knee with a sheet metal. The firefighters had opened a door in the roof of the bus, like the lid of a huge overturned can. They cleared the opening and showed him what they had found.

There were burnt leather seats and popped springs. There was an unbearable smell of rubber and fuel. Then he thought he saw, under the steering wheel that was still on the dashboard, the body of a boy dressed in the overalls. And in the darkness, under what was left of the dashboard, he discovered two lights. But it was impossible for the indicators to continue working, and that was not what the others had called him for. The small lights went off for a few seconds and came back on at an irregular pace. They did not flicker, but showed the shine of tears.

Ruiz felt his thighs tremble, and thought he was going to faint right there like a medical student on his first day. But he grabbed his head and stopped his dizziness, he advanced at a crawl, crawling between the irons and the lumps of rubber soft and hot like tar.

"My God," he said, and shouts of joy responded from behind him.

"Have the oxygen ready," he asked, raising his voice as high as he could. Then he touched the boy's arm. He felt the shaking, but he did not cry or moan. His breathing was very slow. He grabbed her hand and felt her pulse.

"You're going to be fine," he whispered to what was still a shadow to him. "We're going to get you out." But don't fall asleep, listen to me and don't fall asleep.

He continued talking while trying to remove the child, who was lying on the pedals. Ruiz needed the driver's seat removed a little further. A firefighter came in with a blowtorch and cut off what was left of the seat. Then they grabbed the boy's legs and slowly slid him out. Even if he had fractures, Ruiz thought, they were nothing compared to asphyxiation. There wasn't enough room to pick him up.

-The mask! -He asked, while he rested the boy's head on his lap. Then he lifted him a little higher to hug him against his side like a baby.

The firefighter came out and a nurse handed him the oxygen mask. People's voices came from outside, but Ruiz only had ears attentive to the murmur of the air running through the inside of the tube. He placed the mask over the boy's face.

He must have been twelve years old, maybe. He was thin and had light eyes. His hair was blackened by smoke and his face was covered in grease and soot. Ruiz saw how his fingers trembled as his muscles slowly recovered, like animals that had once been dead. Like corpses that recovered the pale pink of their skin, like mouths that filled with air and exhaled moans after silence. The heat after the cold.

His arms stopped moving, they rested. His legs then twitched in gentle convulsions. He started coughing. Ruiz took off his mask and turned his head to the side in case he vomited, but he didn't. He gave her oxygen again and adjusted the elastic of the mask behind her head.

"I'm going out," he warned. He heard the movements of the people as he moved aside so that they could widen the opening a little more. The air in there was becoming unbreathable for him too. Added to the previous smells was that of metal freshly melted by the blowtorch.

Finally the aroma of rain entered like a fresh mist. The humidity outside did not bother him after ten minutes in that confinement. It was free air,

water falling from the sky to extinguish the ashes and chase away the stench in that metal cemetery.

6

Ibáñez saw the ambulance carrying the body of the bus driver start, with the low lights on but without the siren. I did not know to him in what condition they had found him, or whether the autopsy would be difficult or not. At that moment he only thought about shaking the mud off his shoes so as not to dirty the car, then he got in and started the engine. He didn't make it twenty meters when the face of the same woman he had seen when he arrived appeared next to him, with her hands and fingers against the glass, like those dolls with suction cup hands. But his grimace was not amused, not even grotesque, just excruciatingly painful, as if he had taken a step forward in her spirit since the last time he had seen her. It was no longer horror, but the pain of sores that cannot be seen with the naked eye. And again the man's hands grabbed her shoulders and tore her away with a sound like a structure breaking. Not glass or wood, but metal whose roar was an exact equivalent of the accident, as if she were recreating the disaster with her screams, a reminiscence that would be repeated over and over again in the same place, whatever was there later. from today. Because memories, Ibáñez thinks, are ripe fruits of time, fruits that become independent of the days and never rot, and in themselves carry the seeds of their reproduction.

He stopped the car long enough for the parents to pull away. He felt his heart race and he rolled down the window that the woman had dirty. He took a deep breath and remembered his son in the arms of his wife, far away in the hospital. One child was born while twenty others died. Was this paradox possible? Time and space do not always run together. The tracks and the dead were the only things that could be seen there. So, could there exist at the same time a place where life bloomed more intensely than a rose bush at the beginning of spring? Sometimes Mateo Ibáñez thought that reality was an illusion of the senses, a scenario projected by the mind. Only memories of other places and times rescue us from madness, from that state of loss and loss that is true madness.

He looked ahead. The ambulance had turned the corner and disappeared into the avenue. He started and followed the same path. The police greeted him, and he took one last look at the silhouette of the train in the drizzle, at the reflection of the red lights of the fire engines on the metal, at the columns of smoke that rose from the twisted remains of the

bus. He turned on the radio. He was playing a be-bop that seemed blasphemous at that moment, he changed the dial and left it on a classical music station. Two minutes later he recognized the first movement of Beethoven's seventh symphony. In a short time the second would begin, a funeral march that had always fascinated him, a tempo with which Beethoven had conquered him since he was a child and listened to the recordings of the nine symphonies by Toscanini on the 78 records that his father had.

He caught up to the ambulance and stayed behind. It was mid-afternoon and the streets were slowly erasing the memories of what he had seen on the tracks. The boys ran along the sidewalks or held their mothers' hands. The water fell from the sky with less pain, and a strident reflection filtered through the clouds to give the asphalt a dazzling but opaque tone. Puddles here and there delighted the children who played after class and before starting their homework when night fell. Before snack with coffee with milk or a glass of cocoa, with sweet cookies and jam, watching cartoons on television. Ibáñez felt like he was out there, watching himself go down the street behind an ambulance that today fulfilled the role of a hearse, in his rural Fiat pearled with raindrops, from which a sad march emerged, too much for some to understand. . A rhythm whose melancholy seemed to be born from roots rooted through the pavement in the old land that had once seen the sky with eyes of clay. The old land that they had covered with tar or cobblestone clothing, making it mute, deaf and blind, but still with enough hands to sometimes tear the mantle and catch bodies to feed on.

Those streets were roads, they passed through the city, and as such they were only stages, transitions. It was easier for her to imagine his son, now that the seventh symphony had capitulated his sadness and reached the end with a typical Beethovenian apotheosis. But the rigor of destiny that music had insisted on proclaiming was too similar to rigor mortis, impossible to reverse and only replaced by rot, the softening of the body and the emission of excrescences: an apotheosis, too, perhaps, that music tried to convert. into something more beautiful for our consolation. The arts are pious, doctors are butchers, Ibáñez told himself.

They arrived at the morgue and the ambulance descended the underground entrance ramp as if sinking into a tomb. But Ibáñez turned the corner and parked in the staff lot. A security guard was waiting for him behind the front door.

-Good afternoon doctor.

He waved and continued on to the locker room. While he was getting dressed for the operating room, he asked if his assistant had arrived.

"A new nurse starts today, doctor," the manager told him. "A very pretty girl," he added with a smile.

Ibáñez did not answer him, he was not in the mood to talk about women after what he had seen. He walked through the door that led directly to the operating room. The corpse was already lying naked on the marble table. Two cleaning men were mopping the floor, and the smell of disinfectant was almost a relief after the stench at the accident site.

"Good morning, doctor," the nurse said.

He was young, with brown hair gathered under his cap, but two strands escaped at the nape of his neck. He had clear and intelligent eyes.

-Good morning, young lady. What's her name?

-Solitude, doctor.

She turned around. Ibáñez had not been able to see if she was smiling at him, he had the mask on.

She approached him again to put the gloves on him, and he felt the perfume of her skin mixed with the aroma of mud and burnt hair emanating from her body next to them. He then looked at the corpse for the first time with the attention that his work demanded of him. A man of almost fifty years old, obese and tall. Bald except for fine black hair on the sides and nape of the neck. He had two days' worth of beard and a scruffy, nicotine-stained mustache. With a broad chest and pronounced abdomen, face up his abdominal fat seemed to be hidden. His right arm was broken in several places, with the bones exposed. His left leg had a wound that went around his thigh and down to the back of his knee. His right leg was fractured and bone fragments were protruding from the front. His right foot was rotated outwards by more than ninety degrees. There were several deep cuts on his face, bruises on his forehead, and his left ear had been torn off. Ibáñez went around the table looking for the left arm, but he only found a stump where the bone stuck out with a chipped end. He rested his hands on his chest. He felt his ribs crackle as if they were floating on a mattress of air.

"Multiple rib fractures with massive pneumothorax," he said, while the nurse took notes. We are going to open, but first we will do a puncture to take samples.

Mateo stuck the needle between his ribs. His syringe filled with blood quickly.

-Hemothorax with probable aortic rupture.

Then he used the saw to cut through the sternum and separated the ribs. The blood flowed until it stopped a minute later, running through the slots in the table and disappearing into the central hole that drained into a metal bucket.

He extended the incision to the abdomen. The fat made it difficult to grasp the viscera.

-There doesn't seem to be any damage. But... -Ibáñez continued exploring blindly with his hands. -There is a severe tear of the bladder and fracture of the pelvis.

He went back to the chest and took out the heart. He watched it for a few minutes.

-Normal shapes, without obvious congenital alterations. We will leave it for pathological anatomy.

Soledad nodded and put the organ in a bag.

Ibáñez began to check the exposed fractures. He was not interested in his amputated arm, it had a cut evidently made by one of the irons of the microphone. The right arm was broken in four places. He wiped away the blood and found a skin-colored protective dressing on the back of her hand. He removed it carefully because it was almost the only site that was almost completely preserved. He saw a small cut and two bite marks. But they were not the ones left by a dog's incisors, as he first thought, but rather two front ones. It was typically a human bite.

"Maybe the man got into a fight with someone," said the nurse.

-But it must have been that same morning, look at the iodine stain, and there is no scar nor has the infection developed yet.

He asked for a scalpel and opened the wound further. The third metacarpal bone was fractured in half.

-Write down, Soledad. Recent injury to the right hand due to a human bite on the back, with a single fracture of the third metacarpal. Probable aggression lasting no more than three hours.

Ibáñez thought before starting to suture.

"This must have made it difficult for him to handle," he said, while he accepted the thread and clamp from the nurse. Having to maneuver or shift from the stick to the floor with a broken hand is sometimes almost impossible.

-Do you think the insurance will cover this cause, doctor?

-If the reason is what the driver did before starting to work, I don't believe it. Even if he got into a fight with someone, maybe he was drunk too. We have to wait for the results of the breathalyzer and the expert opinion of the mechanics, if they find something among those remains.

-My God, everything "Those poor kids..." said the nurse.

Ibáñez looked at her for a moment. If only one thing had been different that morning, all those boys would be in their homes, and the corpse that was now in his hands would perhaps have begun to drink mate for his wife

in some suburban neighborhood at that moment. . Ibáñez felt as sure of that as he did of the fact that in the clinic his wife and his son were sleeping while they waited for him to take them home. What was reality and what was part of an illusion created by the mind of a god with a changing mood. Maybe it was all the result of a schizophrenic or psychopathic god. Which diagnosis would be the most correct for that entity that played with chance and destiny by throwing dice on a mat of human skin, whose number could change the color of that mat to blood red. Blood that he needed to come out sometime to know the architecture of the world and thus form its internal plot.

7

The boy was breathing at a regular pace, but he had to be taken to the hospital as soon as possible. He looked outside and flashes blinded him for an instant. It wasn't the sun, nor even the reflection between the clouds after the rain, enough to hurt eyes accustomed to the claustrophobic darkness of the bus reduced to the shape of a dead spider. They were the flashes of the cameras and the lights of the television cameras that were looking for them like two mice about to come out of hiding.

He lifted the boy into his arms just as he would have done with a crepe paper doll that he had built or at least repaired, and that the slightest touch could ruin. Something that he had rescued from a corner similar to the black circle where they say the dead enter, and that now slowly, laboriously had begun to breathe again with a crackling sound that he did not like, but that was nevertheless a human sound, and that It was enough at that point in time: a sign of life, because the rest is always an eternal silence that shapes, files and rubs the surface of things to make them enter the enormous space of nothingness.

Ruiz has always been afraid of that alone. Not of heights or abysses, of confinement or disproportionate breadth, but fear of imagining nothingness as a void that has been jumped without realizing it, or brushed like someone passing over the edge of a cliff at high speed. A hollow space that will always be there in front of you and you can't even see it.

That's why he lifted the boy like the only jewel built with bones that he had rescued alive from the accident, he crouched through the opening they had widened and knelt next to the board to immobilize the body. He made sure the mask was tight and the oxygen tube indicated the correct pressure. Ruiz seemed to be in charge of everything, checking the vital signs, placing the Velcro strips on the legs and chest and the rubber collar. He asked for the stethoscope and listened to the heartbeat. He checked the pulse and

blood pressure. He was going to say that he was ready to get into the ambulance when he heard an arrhythmia. The pressure decreased and his heart accelerated at an irregular pace. Two nurses looked at him without knowing what to do.

"We're leaving!" they heard him say.

Ruiz put down the stethoscope and rested his ear on the boy's chest. Then he put his palms on her breastbone and pushed again and again. How many he had recovered in that way, he did not remember. Maybe none in his entire career. Orthodox methods that were rarely effective. Rudiments of medicine against the centripetal force of a tornado that led towards the waters of the River Styx. Turbulent waters clouded by mud.

He felt the flashes around him like lightning on a night that was approaching stormy and cold. The murmurs of the people were like small waves breaking on the beach around the tracks. A mud beach where a large iron animal lay stopped like a king who had run over his subjects without malice or intention, and was waiting in his sleep for the remains to be separated before continuing on his way.

As he pushed on the boy's chest to make the little heart speak again, he knew that every second was taking away a handful of possibilities, and that his gestures were on the way to becoming a caricature of a poor hospital doctor.

He stopped for a moment to rest and loosen his hands. He didn't know how long, he would only remember later that he looked up at those around him and saw a dozen faces looking into his eyes. The cameras took advantage of the opportunity and released their luminous mist. Even he could appreciate the heat of the lights, dirtying the air already fed up with humidity and sweat. But there were so many faces that he couldn't have found the faces of the boy's parents, if they were there. Because he would have wanted to get rid of the child once and for all. Leave the responsibility that he he had imposed himself. Deliver the body along with the cross. He didn't know why he thought of this, he wasn't a religious man. He only associated the cross with its pre-Christian meaning: cross and punishment.

Crossroads, exactly like that level crossing. As illustrated by the yellow road signs, now dirty with dirt and oblivion, on the sides of the street.

8

I know there is someone else by my side. He's not a man, I'm sure of that. It is an imprecise thing without body or mind, only force without teeth but

which he presses as sharply as if he had them. He's close, but I still prefer not to look. I turn my face towards the memories, and I think about the last time I spoke with Don Oscar. I looked at him for a long time. I looked at the triangle on his back, his wide neck spinning nervously and without rhythm, without a rhythm that would identify his thoughts. I would have liked to ask him what I had done wrong to make him treat me like that a while before, if after all Pablo had provoked me. I felt it was beyond unfair. I was always disturbed by the lack of logic in the actions of adults, those reasonings that could make their lives easier. I came to imagine my parents' fights as the voices of two little cancers that were growing in their brains, obstructing the coherence and harmony of events. My grandmother had died of a stroke, and although I didn't understand what it meant at the time, I imagined it as a traffic accident where a truck left the road and dumped its contents on the shoulder.

Then, like a liquid that spills over, I couldn't contain myself, and I asked with all the anger that she had accumulated that morning:

-Don Oscar, why did you tell me that?

The man looked at me in the rearview mirror. We had just stopped in front of the level crossing barriers. The doorbell rang but the light did not turn on. Some pedestrians crossed looking both ways. We had a short line of three cars and a truck behind us.

-What are you talking about, kid?

-Why did he challenge me if I didn't do anything?

He made a gesture of tiredness and fury at the same time. He turned around and said to me:

-Come here.

There was something I didn't like about his face and his voice. It wasn't a scream or a direct threat, but I felt that this time it would be different from the simple outburst from a while ago. I got up and stood next to him, almost touching his right shoulder with my left arm. I kept my gaze down, making circles with my index finger on the gear shift.

"Don't act stupid because you don't have anything to do with that," Don Oscar told me. "Quiet kids like you are the worst, they provoke others just by being in front of them." They are leprosy, if you know what that is. You have sores growing in your intestines and you shit worse than shit.

I know all the kids heard it because I heard the silence that formed on the microphone. Outside the bell continued to ring, the rumble of the engines and the clatter of the train leaving the station. I looked up to see myself in the mirror. Her cheeks were red but without signs of tears. Somehow I knew I wasn't going to cry. Something was stronger than the

pain, a barrier higher and wider than the level crossing had protected me from Don Oscar. A concrete and iron dam that raised my fists and brought them against the driver's neck. I threw myself at him with my eyes closed, but I felt his strong hands separate me easily as I fumbled in the darkness. I only managed to hit myself with the dashboard and the steering wheel, and once with the windshield without damaging it.

"The whore who gave birth to you!" Don Oscar shouted as he separated me.

I opened my eyes just in time to see the train pass, so I only heard the echo of the last word and only saw the gestures of the boys who got up from their seats without daring to approach. And that's why I didn't hear the sound of Don Oscar's slap on my face either. Not only his left cheek, but my entire face was marked by the blow of his hardened palm. A hand that had touched valves and spark plugs, changed tires and greased engines. A hand that must have touched women with some gentleness once.

I didn't cry either. I saw how the barriers were raised, but Don Oscar was not looking ahead, but outside, as if he was afraid that they had seen him. He looked nervous, and he looked back at me.

"Go sit down!" He said, raising his right hand again, and I thought he was going to try again, and that now his hand would definitely hurt me. And without knowing how or having thought about it before, I stopped his hand with mine and bit it.

Don Oscar screamed without insults, he made a more than unpleasant grimace on his unshaven face. He grabbed his hand with the other and pressed it against his body. I heard his contained moan of pain, as if his pride was also squeezing his throat. I took a few steps back, but I knew that my companions were not going to do anything to me. Boys They looked open-mouthed from their places and a couple of girls were crying.

My hair was wet with perspiration. The duster had stuck to me like a straitjacket. I didn't move. I looked at Don Oscar's face, both surprised and full of pain. When he looked at his hand, I saw blood coming from a vein on the back and I was scared. I took another step back until I was at the height of the first seat. Don Oscar got up to look for something in the glove compartment. He rummaged through a pile of old objects, but he did not find what he was looking for.

-The reputable mother who gave birth to you! I'm going to look for a bandage at the kiosk, and don't let anyone come down!

The train had already passed and the barriers went up. The line of cars had increased. The drivers honked, leaned out and shouted obscenities at the driver. He just glared at them and headed straight to the kiosk on the corner. Some cars passed us by, but soon the barrier lowered again. It was

hot, and the situation was more than complicated, I was aware of that. But I was only afraid of my mother.

Pablo approached me from behind. He hit me on the head and backed away laughing his silly laugh.

"What a fool, what a fool!" He kept repeating, pointing his finger at me.

God, I thought, it was time to show what I was hiding. It was time to put away the shame. Advance mercilessly on others. There may be no middle ground, no justice, no chivalry. At twelve years old he was completely sure that there are only two sides in the world: those who dominate and those who allow themselves to be dominated.

He then jumped on me, and two other boys dared to follow him. I fell into the driver's seat, but I managed to slip away little by little under the weight of the three, who couldn't hold me well because the gear lever and the steering wheel hindered them. I got between the pedals, hit their legs, and slid to the side. I used the lever to hold on, and felt something break. The engine had been running all that time, Don Oscar had forgotten to turn it off after what happened. The microphone rattled and the engine died. The boys stopped when they saw Don Oscar returning down the sidewalk threatening them with his good fist. They were already in his seats when he got on.

-Sit down! -He said almost without looking at me.

I went to my seat and we all fell silent. Outside the honking continued, some had stopped to look and were laughing at us. I was agitated and afraid, because my thoughts were beyond the tracks. When I got home, Mom would be as ardently hostile as the midday humidity. I imagined Don Oscar getting off the bus holding me by the ear to the door of my house, and my mother giving me silent looks of reproach while she listened to the driver.

Beyond the river of steel was the battlefield. It was a river that was somehow not worth crossing. But time is his own enemy, like a man who carries a handful of seeds in his left hand and a .45 pistol in his right.

Don Oscar turned the ignition key. The engine ran perfectly. The barriers were going up again, but the bus didn't respond to first gear. Again the horns sounded demanding, and a couple of people came up to ask if we needed help. Don Oscar shook his head, he was too dazed and confused. Several minutes passed, but finally the bus moved forward and ascended the slight hill on the tracks. We were in the middle of them when something got stuck in the gear shift. Don Oscar made attempts to move the lever while he squeezed the clutch. The engine shut down several times and he managed to restart it several times. When he wanted to return to first gear the bus did not respond. Don Oscar accelerated but the engine seemed to be permanently drowned.

I saw that his hand hurt and the dressing was beginning to stain with blood. He was getting nervous and drowned out the pain by looking to the sides. We had lost a lot of time, and the barriers began to lower in front of and behind us. The cars backed up and the drivers got out. Several neighbors ran to help us. They all started pushing while others told us to get down. Don Oscar looked to the right and remained absorbed for a few seconds. The train heading to the station was approaching too quickly.

My classmates screamed and ran down the aisle, a few crying in their seats. Several men got on the bus and began to take us off one by one, but there were twenty-seven of us to leave through the only narrow door in front.

The train continued moving, and began to sound its strident horn insistently. Announcing what did not need to be announced, and I don't know why, just at that moment I remembered a western comic where the train ran over a girl tied to the tracks and the driver shouted: Watch where you're going!

People tried to e pushed the microphone, but the address box had stuck. The unquestionable thing was that the bus had gotten stuck like a dying whale on a beach, ready to let itself die. The efforts of several ant-like creatures couldn't pull him away from her, only other machines like her would, and there was no time for that.

The train was less than a block away.

I stood next to Don Oscar, who had not left the seat, trying to regain control of his vehicle. I didn't think then if it was because he only cared about saving the bus, or because he didn't want to surrender to the inevitable truth. He could have helped us down, a safer boy was better than nothing. But I didn't care about all that. She hugged my waist and started crying. He looked at me for a second and then pushed me down to hide between his legs.

9

Were the eight o clock. It had stopped raining and the clouds were retreating to the south, driven by a wind whose true strength was only a small sample on the city streets. A fresh breeze that seemed like a gift and comfort that a poor or greedy God gave to his creatures after a disaster.

Ibáñez contemplated the rainbow, at least part of it between two tall buildings. He walked a block and arrived at the plaza. There he could see

almost the entire arch. He had his raincoat folded hanging from his right forearm. He lit a cigarette and watched a couple of dogs playing and drinking in the puddles of water. They approached to sniff his pants and wagged their tails, but they immediately left when they heard the call of an old woman carrying a bag. The dogs jumped around her and she slowly sat down on a bench and pulled out two backbones, still raw and red. They began to eat, one each, sitting on each side of the bench.

Mateo Ibáñez then thought about the children on the tracks.

My God, he said to himself, damn the profession that makes me think like that. He had a newborn son waiting for him. He rubbed his face, strained with fatigue. He got back in the car and drove to the clinic. It was already dark when he arrived, and the lights from the entrance were like a little paradise to sleep in. White but dim lights, typical of hospices and psychiatric hospitals.

When he entered, the receptionists greeted him with a smile while still answering the phones. There were two or three people waiting for his turn in the waiting room. He took the elevator to the third floor. The door was closing when Dr. Cisneros entered.

-How about Ibáñez?

-Good, Alberto. But what am I saying, my God! Very good. Today my wife gave birth to a boy.

-But congratulations! -She said, shaking his hand tightly.

Cisneros was wearing the duster with the clinic's logo embroidered on the upper left pocket. He had his hair combed with gel, a tan that highlighted his light blue eyes.

-I'm a little distracted. I had work all afternoon and I came to see my family. There was an accident at a level crossing...

-Yes, I heard the news on the television in the room of the boy I was attending to. The oncologist called me two hours ago. It's a terminal case, Mateo. The last week he was screaming like a beaten dog, but I was able to sedate him a little. The father is hysterical and the mother is a zombie. But at least the boy no longer screams and wakes up to talk to them from time to time.

The elevator stopped and they went down to the third floor. Ibáñez remembered that boy, the last time he saw him he was impressed by his appearance. Mateo felt something suddenly settle on his back, like a load of bags of bones, or the weight of iron so similar to the uncontrollable march of memory. But why in that place, he asked himself, where his newborn son was waiting for him, why there where life poured out of the rooms with vital tears. However, crying is crying, and who could tell from afar and by hearing

whether it is joy or pain. He looked at Cisneros, who continued speaking, but heard only the last words.

-...Martín died this afternoon at three. If you had seen him, skinny and yellow.

Ibáñez said goodbye promising to stay in touch. He walked down the hall towards room 21. He knocked and opened the door. The room was illuminated by the hand lamp next to the head of the bed, where his wife slept. The body was shaded by the baby that was resting next to her. After closing the door to avoid the light from the hallway, Mateo approached in silence. He touched the head of his son.

The child was sleeping. His little arms moved in the dream that Ibáñez imagined was placid and heavenly.

But can babies dream about other things, he wondered. He would have liked to question his son Blas about the fate of the children's souls. However, for now it was a possibility as remote as fighting death.

10

"Three and a half minutes," said the nurse. .

Ruiz stopped looking at the faces of the curious people who surrounded the place like one of the circles of hell. The boy had been dead for three and a half minutes. It was time to let time pass, he told himself. It was useless to retain the seconds when everything tends to flow more easily than the harsh human thought, which like a crude flypaper, tries to turn the world into a museum of insects, into a morgue where formaldehyde reigns and silence is only broken. by the buzz of the new and young flies.

His hands stopped on the boy's chest. The flashes continued to explode like delayed lightning from a huge malfunctioning camera. Ruiz remembered the white lights of the hospital where he worked, and now they seemed so similar to those used in refrigerators that a tremor ran down his spine. He closed his eyes. What was the hospital morgue, if not, more than a cooling chamber. A room superbly illuminated by spotlights that will never disturb the dead.

He began to feel the body as if he didn't believe it was whole, wondering why the disaster had spared that body only to kill it by suffocation shortly after. But suddenly he saw something coming out of the corner of the boy's mouth, sliding down his chin. He saw the slow fall of saliva and was told that even the dead shed secretions for a time. And yet, as he held the child's

head, he thought he perceived a faint breath on the back of his hand. He opened her eyelids, shone the flashlight into her eyes, and found the reflection intact. His chest was now moving at a regular, steady pace.

He replaced the mask and applied dilators to the IV. The people who had walked away returned, and a strange murmur began to grow around Ruiz and the others. He didn't look, so he didn't know if it was approval, surprise, or perhaps disappointment. He had witnessed many times that death was a contract killer who did not charge anything. An ally who carried the annoying burdens of sick bodies. But even more annoying is seeing them return. If they left taking with them every memory and every love, or every memory and every hate, when they return, don't expect the world to be the same. The emptiness of his departure is like a broken balloon, it cannot be refilled with air, it cannot be repaired or rebuilt. Just throw it in a wasteland along with other waste that has been waiting for who knows how long.

Ruiz remained still for a moment, as if his blood was waiting for his mind to adapt to what he was seeing. The child had recovered and was breathing almost normally, scrunching up his face and crying, emitting inarticulate moans that were intended to form words, perhaps his name.

A moment later he opened his eyes for a few seconds. They were brown, and they looked at Ruiz without fear or pain or gratitude, simply like someone looking at an instrument that has been of great use.

But Ruiz did not think about this. He just said:

-He closes his eyes and breathes calmly. You're fine, son, you're completely fine.

He gently stroked her head of hard, singed hair, looking up at the afternoon sky that was beginning to fall, the night that was advancing from the horizon like hundreds of dark birds on the tracks.

eleven

There's someone here with me. He is not the man who picked me up and placed a plastic mask on my face, making me breathe easier. My lungs are freeing themselves from stagnant smoke, as if the new air were a torrent of water carrying away the dust and ashes of devastation.

There is someone breathing with me, helping me control the rhythm. I know my own body, I try to tell him, but he advises me silently and with a smile that I can guess despite my closed eyes. It is the tone of his voice without the sound of it that comforts and disturbs me at the same time. He

looks like those insistent street vendors who pass from house to house, and his words are so overwhelming that they convince not because of fatigue, but because of the slow transformation that has occurred in us, we become clay molded by his hands. We suspect, deep down in the situation, that there is a surreptitious interest in his words, and we regret having opened the door to them.

I don't know what it's called yet. He doesn't want to tell me his name.

He's a boy my age, or barely older, maybe. He has that typical conceit that makes us act like adults, but whose words and turns reveal fiction. I have also invented girlfriends for my colleagues, I have related adventures and anecdotes that have never happened to me, and I improved reality to the satisfaction of my battered ego.

That's what he does, he surrounds me with words of encouragement that slowly turn into a cracked tone of threat. There are cracks in the surface of his smooth meekness, holes through which a deeper darkness emerges. than the one I now know, the one with closed eyes. His gloom has the smell of rotten earth, of those fields next to the roads where people throw their run-over dogs.

The new air has helped me a lot. I feel like I'm moving backwards. The waves carry me towards the beach again. I open my eyes for a moment, and I see the beams of light that penetrate through openings made in the iron of the microphone. Everything is black and scorched, everything lies upside down, except us. The man who has me and him hugging me in his lap. His hands hold me so I don't fall, his eyes look towards the light and shout something that I don't understand. My ears burn and ring. Then he lifts me up a little, dragging me through the narrow space between twisted iron.

I close my eyes again because the intense light hurts me. I know I've survived whatever we've been through. I remember the train coming towards us, Don Oscar's frightened face, the liquid of fear hardened like frozen mercury, forming the spheres of his eyes.

That's why I know what fear is about. Not the trivial fear of a failed exam, nor even the uncertainty I felt when my parents separated. It only remotely resembles that concern I once had when I saw my grandfather's body in his coffin. Mom had lifted me up a little to say goodbye to him, and I saw that something was taking him away. Something that dragged him moaning across the floor without anyone else seeing him, and that dragging was so slow and so unbearable that I closed my eyes, covered my ears, and started screaming.

My eyelids are open, but others don't notice. I see, however, behind the veil of opaque tears of soot and dirt, the sad light of this cloudy day, and sporadic flashes like lightning. I hear voices, a growing murmur that fades as soon as I feel the strong pain in my chest.

“My God, he's leaving us,” I think I heard. They are pricking my arms, and my veins are burning.

The sea begins to calm down, there are no waves to push me back. I lift my head and see the clouds over the water. It rains and I float adrift. I'm afraid, not panic. Only that fear that reaps anguish and desolation. I swim a little like a dog, but my arms and legs are getting tired. I have no pain, only a feeling of extreme sadness, of irremediable sorrow. Everything of mine has been left on the beach, what has belonged to me and what I will never have. Even the memory of my father and the memory of my mother when she was younger and better, fade away. The days at the beach and the car rides, the streets on the way to school, the broken toys and the images seen in a movie theater on a Sunday afternoon. Everything sinks behind the waves now so far away, as if the beach were a toll station that we have passed after paying the price.

Then I see a raft, yellow, ahead. It is a point of color in the darkness of the sea. I see someone raise their hand and greet me. I can't quite see him, but he soon approaches and stretches his arms out to reach me.

"Hold on!" He tells me, and I recognize his voice.

He is the one who has been accompanying me for a while.

I try to move towards the raft and finally manage to grab the edge, but I slip and he grabs my hand. With difficulty I manage to climb up while he lifts me by my clothes. How strange, I think, he hadn't realized that he was still wearing the school overalls, and the wet clothes were heavier than my own body. I dropped to the floor of the raft, took a few deep breaths, and then sat down. I looked at the other boy carefully for the first time. He was dressed in a hospital camisole. He was extremely skinny and had a haggard face with deep circles under his eyes, thin hair with uneven strands, as if he had fallen out recently. However, his look belies the appearance.

"My name is Martín," he tells me with a smile similar to that of a hyena, but immediately afterward his mouth twists into a grimace that reminds me of a wounded dog.

-Thanks for helping.

But he doesn't answer me, he just lifts his camisole with his left hand and puts his right hand under him. He pulls out a short shotgun. At first it occurs to me that it is a toy, but I quickly realize that it is one of those sold in gun stores for children.

-My dad gave it to me. We go hunting together once a year in the forests.

-Do you know how to use it?

He laughs and raises the gun, positions it and watches me through the scope. I don't understand his game. The boy's presence had calmed me down, but now I'm afraid again. By reflex, I raise my arms and put my hands in front of me as if that could stop a bullet. The boy laughs even more.

"I need your body," he says without stopping pointing.

I don't understand what he means.

"We have to go back to the beach," I insist.

-Haven't you realized yet? ?

He shakes his head, as if resigned to no longer trying to explain anything to me.

"Where are we?" I ask.

-I don't know, but we don't have much time left. The further we get from the beach our bodies become lost. That is, your body is losing itself. Mine is already cemetery meat.

I look at the liquid and gray nothingness around us, a chill runs down my spine.

"Aren't you afraid?" I say trembling.

-You are the only one who is afraid. Like a rabbit in a trap.

Then the hammer goes down and I scream in panic.

-No, please, please!

I do not know why I do it. If I saw the immense mass of the train pounce on the bus, and I didn't even scream, why am I so afraid now. I feel naked despite being dressed in soaked clothes, alone and helpless in a place from which there is no possible rescue, and my soul is exposed like a broken bone through the skin.

Then I realize everything, like when a frosted glass slides back and we see the clear landscape of a nuclear war.

I wonder if the souls of children always lack guides as is happening to me now, if they wander lost on flimsy rafts on the sea, walk without water in the deserts or barefoot and naked in the middle of the jungle. Maybe souls are not immortal either, maybe they must fight to survive. The souls of children may also bleed and drown.

The boy lowers the gun, and the look on his face implies that he hasn't intended to use it from the beginning. He approaches me almost crawling in the small space we have, and he grabs my shoulders. I try to curl up against one end, shivering. He must be barely a year older than me, and he is weak.

But the threat of his posture and his smile dismantle my defenses. He pushes me over the edge. I try to hold on to the raft, I even try to push him in the opposite direction, and I manage to stop his movements for a few moments. He is even weaker than he seems, and I need to take advantage of that to save myself. But then he does something unexpected.

-Please, I need your body!-He shouts at me with a desperate voice, his face twisted with pain. Just like the faces and voices of the guys on the microphone.

I can't fight anymore, then. I must admit that he has defeated me.

And who is waiting for me at home, I wonder. Maybe my father's crying and my mother's bitter remorse.

The world similar to what it has always been.

"It's time," I reflect in a low voice.

I don't know if he hears me, but he suddenly renews his strength and hits me in the chest. I fall into the water, and my school overalls and shoes become an anchor. My eyes slowly leave the line of the sea, as they watch the raft move away towards the beach.

I've finally woken up. I look at the face of the doctor who looks at me with tearful eyes, and the beautiful reflection of the sun between the clouds after the storm, cleaning the dirty shadows of the disaster. I know that my body, although beaten, is healthy. And I also know, even though they insist on giving me another name, that my name is Martín.

HOME

1

He rested his elbow on the pillow and his head rested on his right hand. He was smoking a cigarette and the ash fell on the sheets. But he couldn't see anything other than the little red light at the top, humbly illuminating the shadowed room. Because he couldn't expect that a simple cigarette would be able to illuminate the beauty of Nadia's body, since she was sleeping with her back to him in that same bed. She was naked, betrayed by the sheets that he had removed to observe her once again, in the helpless light of that cigarette.

With his left hand he flicked the ash onto Nadia's left hip. She moved a little, and although he couldn't see her face, he knew she had grimaced with pleasure rather than displeasure. The heat now compensated for the coolness of the night that he had begun to cover her like a frozen sheet, and that she tried to protect herself from in her dreams by placing her hands between her thighs.

He could see the movement of her fingers protruding between her legs, a tremor ran through her without her waking up. He then felt aroused again, even though they had made love twice before she fell asleep. He had not fallen asleep always thinking about the house, at the door of his parents' house. The double wooden door with knockers and an oval-shaped peephole. The house he could never enter again, not even asking permission like he did when his brother lived there with his family.

He, Jorge Benítez, who had been born and lived there for twenty years, no longer had the right only to contemplate it from the opposite sidewalk, as a thief or a snooper, almost like a pervert who anyone would suspect of some crime to be perpetrated very soon.

And it was also true that he acted according to that suspicion, unable to explain the reason for his slow and absorbed pace in front of the house, if not even he knew the reason why his eyes were diverted towards her, or rather his mind. he concentrated so intently on that façade to which a short eave of Spanish tiles provided shade and helped to feed the moss on the walls, to imbibe with humidity and death the entrance door that had let him through so many times when he was a child.

But there are doors, he told himself many times, that only allow the passage of childhood, as if growing up were a forced, inevitable crime. A sentence in a prison without bars where you are alone, a complete desert where doors cannot be conceived because they would go against your own nature. The void, which encompasses almost everything, even the sky and the ground we walk on, does not conceive the material to build a door and a roof.

"That's hell," Jorge murmured, exhaling smoke onto the back of Nadia's neck.

"What, dear?" she said through clenched teeth, barely turning her head.

-I said that hell must be something like heaven, there is no place to escape to, there are no doors or hiding places. God can see you everywhere. Imagine an eternal day, without nights, where the sun always shines squarely on your head, you would get to see the face of God in that sun, making mocking faces at you, taking pity and laughing at you at the same time.

"I think you dreamed, dear," Nadia answered, and she hid her face in the pillow again. But his back was facing the ceiling, hidden in the protective shadow of that night, which, thank God, Jorge thought, still remained, altered and corrupted compared to the ancestral nights of the beginning of time, but still dignified and mysterious.

How to penetrate Nadia's body, since her senses were impenetrable to the thoughts he needed to express to her. Pierce her back with lacerating splinters of ideas so that she would understand what he felt: the supreme helplessness to return, to feel again the absolute abandonment of the world. Because he was afraid since he was born. Maybe the same thing happened to everyone, but how to make them recognize them without appearing crazy, without them looking at you on the street and murmuring "that's where the weirdo happens." A single womanizer at forty, without children and without a home. A sports car, a Torino that thundered through the streets every time he ran to the field on Sundays. A motor that screamed like him on the nights of La Plata through the streets of the whore neighborhood.

"Nadia, listen to me," he murmured, but he knew that she barely heard him with her head of black hair covered by the pillow. Then he pressed his body against hers, rubbing his pelvis against Nadia's pelvis, then he took the cigarette from her lips with his left hand, holding it between his index and middle fingers, while he caressed Nadia's thighs with the others.

She moaned as she felt the heat, but she didn't open her eyes. She let him do it like so many other times, when she simply rubbed her back or kissed her body for minutes, for hours, until sometimes dawn, when he finally fell asleep and she woke up from her.

As if he lived happily during the night, protected by the walls whose color didn't matter because they were like an extension of the woman's skin. As if by molding it with his hands he kneaded the clay to build the tent that isolated him from the stars, which in the end were suns, millions of peepholes through which God peered and monitored the actions of an old and poor theater. Walls of skin that would grow until they became wide and strong like his parents' house. That house they would never let him enter again.

Jorge placed the tip of the cigarette on Nadia's buttock. She turned startled and looked at him without saying anything, but she knew what he was thinking. It was too easy to make him understand what he wanted, mere insinuations of futile things and actions, glimpses that even a beaten dog could understand.

-No, Jorge, not this time, please.

-But if you like...

She was going to answer, however her face showed that she couldn't defend a categorical refusal. She had agreed too many times before to refuse now.

-It's late to start again, I'm sleepy and tomorrow we have to get up early. He turned on the light on the table. -But there are only two hours left, my God, and I'm falling asleep.

The smoke rose above them like a spiral, enveloping the bodies. He kissed her mouth, her neck and her collarbones, he licked Nadia's breasts while she moaned, surrendering to the heat, to the touch of Jorge's body, to the hairs on her chest that rubbed against her like a soft bark with moss. . That's what he smelled like when she sweated, the aroma hidden under the dry leaves in the forest, in the mud hidden under the stones. She had told him this once while they were making love, while he whispered into her ears a faint rhythm of staccato “es” that sounded a lot like the music of the wind through the trees. Because the treetops are also a roof that protects not only from the gaze of God, but from the saliva with which he tries to verify the human nature of the earth, like a scientist afraid that his discovery will fail the next day, or not. be more than a dream.

"Sometimes God also dreams," Jorge said when he reached Nadia's crotch on his kissing path. He must be a goat sometimes, too, if it's true that he created you, my love.

He then rested the cigarette on the skin of Nadia's right thigh. She shook as if she had had an orgasm. She then did the same on the other thigh, closer to the sex, and she moaned again. But she realized that she was crying. It was a different moan, because her breasts shook like those of a sick old woman who cries lost in the street where she has always lived. Nadia lost in her own creations, or rather in the painful walls that she managed to build with the material he had provided her with.

"Some build and others destroy walls," Jorge said as he returned his hands to Nadia's breasts, licking them until leaving a thread of saliva in which he finally put out the last end of the cigarette.

She screamed this time, but he drowned out her voice by penetrating her forcefully, until he noticed the slight transformation of pain into

pleasure, and telling himself, as if praying, that sometimes God was more than a man: he was a great man. inventor.

2

I have to call the old lady. Three days ago it was her birthday and I forgot again. And how old she is, I don't remember if I don't count the year she was born. My God, seventy-nine. Yes, seventy-nine years. I have to get a phone and call her before Sunday. She always gets mad if I do it on Easter Sunday. It's the resurrection of the Lord, he tells me, my birthday was a week ago. That streak, that patina of religious paint with which they varnished her at the nuns' school, when she was little, back in Junín, makes her feel guilty. A Carmelite convent in the middle of the countryside, surrounded by grasslands burned by the summer sun, while the cars passed along the dirt road, raising dust and the smell of dung until they invaded the classrooms and patios, sowing the aroma of animals in the streets. noses of virgin girls and women.

That landscape, or that smell, had prevailed in Mom's mind, even after she had come to the city and married a man who had nothing to do with the countryside. A man like my father, who breathed coffee and cognac drunk in the city's bars, his blond mustache dyed by the tobacco of cigarettes smoked to the butt. A man with eyes softened by alcohol or by the sight of that woman who had come from the interior of the province and who looked with virgin eyes at the bony profile of the face of the person who was going to be my father, the cap tilted to one side and the smell of the port, the fishy smell that he could never get rid of in his entire life. I remember, as if it were today, the smell that his coffin gave off when we buried him, it was like burying a bag of old fish.

My mother's blue eyes.

My God, why would I be thinking about the past. I must call her even if she doesn't remember me, even though Alzheimer's takes her and brings her from imprecise places where she takes refuge to avoid reality. If I could escape too, but I can't because at any moment they, the lawyers and the trials, the other journalists and bad public opinion will fall on me. I know that my name has been stained and trampled on many occasions, they have talked about my collaboration with the de facto government, about the men and women that I have delivered in my articles. That is why I am here, to

add a link in the chain of my claim, a point in my favor that can erase the other. That I don't even remember precisely because I never filed the names that my hands wrote, as if something in my head had been immediately put into operation when I mentioned names and facts or just suspicions. A defensive factor, I know, because if it wasn't them, it would have been me who would have been dragged out of bed on any given night, at gunpoint and supported by three men in civilian clothes, to be put on a green Falcon that would be lost in neighborhoods that I would never see because I was blindfolded, that would never hear my voice because I was gagged with a handkerchief, that without seeing it, I imagined white.

Because white is the sum of all colors that cancels and absolves, like the conjunction of positive and negative, like the meeting of opposite forces, like anger and forgiveness. White is the color of oblivion, it seems to me. Washing memory with hydrochloric acid, until the outside world erior disappears in unbreathable vapors that force the use of masks as bandages from smell. Walking among stench that smells of nothing, a paradox typical of good manners. Masks similar to those worn by the soldiers who have rebelled in Campo de Mayo, under the orders of officers who took up arms against the democracy reestablished three years ago, this baby that looks more like a straw and rag doll because in reality no one has conceived it. I rather believe that he is a dead person that someone took from clandestine cemeteries and made up with great skill to present him on television - a double-edged medium that can raise or bring down the gods of the moment. Because the press, photojournalists like me, are just whores or virgins, both extremes deserving of the same pity and the same disgrace, of the same forgiveness and the immediate revocation of that forgiveness. The truth does not reach the ink of a newspaper, it remains stuck in the conscience, and it is burned with hydrochloric acid, transformed into mist that hides the smell of the corpses.

-What are you doing here?-Mario, the photographer, asked me. He is, like me, around forty-five years old, with a gray beard and long, curly hair. He is wearing a blue pilot bag filled with lenses and cameras, a black bag with more photographic equipment, his hands are sweaty, where a wedding ring has remained forever despite an already long separation. The laws do not tolerate divorce, for now.

-Don't ask me idiotic questions...-I answer.

He looks at me through the window that I keep closed for some reason, as if he could stop a stray bullet. He gives me an obscene sign and then laughs. He turns around and enters the other side.

-Do you really want to have the exclusive? The ass-licking assholes are going to beat you to the punch.

-I know, but there is no one with my experience...

-Double experience, you are right about that.

I don't bother to answer him. He always makes those observations to me that in others are more similar to hatred than sarcasm. I prefer the latter, at least there is a trace of appreciation hidden in its structure, similar to the reproach of a humiliated lover. However, I cannot boast or answer as many times as I would like. I should be walking down the street with my head held high, but immediately the image of a soldier in his uniform with his cap under his arm entering court appears in my memory, and I lower my head and accept the slaps and verbal blows. .

I can't say what I did was right, nor can I say I would do it again. The memory of Gloria terrifies me, it wakes me up with the screech of the Falcon on the cobblestones or the asphalt in a neighborhood traveled by buses full of people, witnesses of kidnappings, witnesses of disappearances typical of magicians who are experts in death. There is no magic, I think, only biology used in favor of a principle. Glory captured because I decided to follow it, I like a bait after which the dogs run in a silence learned with strict discipline following the laws of hunger. So that she would forgive me, just as I do this now to mitigate the rigors and punishments that are coming upon me.

Three years, my God, and if I have a job, it is because of the crumbs of hard bread that old colleagues like Mario throw at me, who even without forgiving me, look me in the eyes and see what I don't know if I still have. That which I do not want to name so as not to fall into the facileness and commonplace that I have nevertheless fallen into when writing the novels for which I became known. That which men preserve until a time after death, and which then disappears in the empty features of rigor mortis.

"So old Bautista Beltrame deserves to vindicate himself," says Mario, patting my knee and giving me a knowing wink.

This time I'm the one who looks at him sarcastically.

-At least you will have material for a new novel.

I buy him a Camel, and I tell him:

-I know many who in the coming months are going to publish novels about the years of lead, and I don't want to be the only scapegoat.

He understands me. No one will mention my name, probably, not with absolute certainty yet, in any novel or essay. The hangover of fear, so to speak, from those years, will still persist for a long time. But if I publish again, it will no longer be with that confidence of someone who fully enters the market with foolproof material, those easy-to-read novels, an acceptable intrigue and some sex that the censors decided to overlook. Because at the end of the day it was I who had written them, a renowned journalist from an important afternoon newspaper. An intellectual who, without mentioning it or shouting it out loud, gave his support to reality. Someone who always adjusted to the laws and patterns dictated by urgent needs.

My two novels had sold a lot, and had received cold but praiseworthy reviews from some critics. ntarists - whether they did it with their hands in their pockets or not, I was not interested in knowing in those days. But then the plagiarism lawsuits appeared. One for the plot of the first book, and two for two stories published in a current magazine. Judicial banalities, my lawyers say, no one can prove anything. That's what I say, and I could also call it revenge if I considered myself naive, but the real name is opportunism. The opportunity is to take advantage of the lateral features of a truth. Like those breaks that occur on the sides of a car when a motorcycle passes too close, they are not noticeable to the naked eye, but over time the paint cracks and rust appears. It is there, as on a sore, where they put their finger.

-No, Mario. I have in mind another novel different from the previous ones. Something police with more psychological features. I want to get away from the social for a long time, at least in fiction.

He laughs and starts coughing. I open the windows.

-But you are buried in reality, Beltrame. They don't take you out of the hole you got into with shovels or hoes.

Look beyond the windshield, soldiers changing guard in front of the barracks. Their faces are daubed in black, short branches with green leaves are on their helmets, their boots echo on the ground to where we are sitting, more than fifty meters behind the base gates. A junior officer directs the change of platoons. But all this is done behind two rows of bags stacked just over a meter high. Television cameras are on the fences, some broadcast live. The rebellion and the taking of the military camp only began a few hours ago.

-Do you know something, did they tell you something?

-What am I going to know?

-I mean, just, they are your friends...

Then I punch him in the nose, which goes badly because of the limited space and having to use my left hand. Mario puts his hand to his face and checks to see if he is bleeding. In the end I only manage to bruise him more than a little.

-The fucking mother who gave birth to you...- he tells me.

I think of my old woman, the one with the blue eyes lost in the sky of Alzheimer's. I look ahead at the smeared faces of the soldiers, who appear like black caterpillars over the palisades. It's cold outside, but it's warm in the car. I feel well accompanied, even with this guy whom I finally don't know whether to consider friend or enemy.

-This week my mother turns seventy-nine years old. For her, the world stopped fifteen years ago. She voted for Perón in '73, and sometimes she asks me, when she is more lucid, what year it is.

Mario is looking at me.

-Forgive me.

-Other guys worse than you have already hit me, Beltrame. Don't worry.

He starts setting up his camera. I start taking notes in my notebook, looking up from time to time towards the barracks. The afternoon light over Campo de Mayo, the lights of the military trucks on. Smoke from exhaust pipes forming a smoke screen in front of the main building. The camera flashes like lightning breaking the silence of Holy Thursday.

Twenty meters to my left, a group of very young journalists drink mate and share their sandwiches. I note this too, the way they break the bread into equal pieces and pass it from hand to hand. There was no one in the center of that circle, only the alert light of a television camera, like a will-o'-the-wisp fixed and serene in its cruel and constant truth.

3

Jorge Benítez walked with his hands in his jean pockets. He was wearing black leather sandals and a white short-sleeved T-shirt. He walked with his eyes engrossed in the tiles of the sidewalk. On Saturday afternoons he didn't work, so he entertained himself by walking the streets of La Plata, touring the quiet and sleepy neighborhood on summer afternoons. They were the same sidewalks and facades that he had seen as a child, little had changed. Some walls kept the marks of the balls that he, his brother and the other kids in the neighborhood had made while playing in the street. There was less traffic, it's true, but on afternoons like this time seemed not to have passed, as if things did not suffer the passage of time just when we feel it pass with more pain. When we feel old or useless, things insist on boasting about their eternal youth. But Benítez could not feel resentment toward that neighborhood. He knew that he was approaching his parents' house, his house, which due to those issues of grammar and time no longer belonged to him except in memory. And what is memory, he asked himself. Reality or fantasy of the mind? How to ensure that the things that once belonged to us are still there behind us.

He looked at his feet as he walked, observed the rhythmic step of the sandals on the sometimes broken, uneven sidewalk. sometimes, interrupted by a lying dog that looked up as if it shared a feeling, perhaps even a

common destiny. There were no clouds and it was three in the afternoon, who would think of going out at that time in the middle of summer. But Jorge Benítez never took a nap. At home, his mother invariably went to bed from two to five in the afternoon, a custom that had been passed down to her from his childhood in the countryside. His father also rested on weekend afternoons. After lunch with pasta or roast, the wandering aroma of demijohn wine would slip from his lips and he would fall asleep on the tablecloth that her mother left untouched until she got up from her nap. Especially on Sundays, time seemed to stop forever, but they were never free from fear. Because everyone knew that it would end, that even eternity has an end and a Monday that follows it. The next morning and work were alarm clocks not only for the civic conscience, but for the moral conscience of man. The remorse of laziness, Jorge thought as he walked through the neighborhood.

He knew that tomorrow would be Sunday, and that he wouldn't be able to take Gabriel to the court. His brother and his nephew had left him, probably forever. He couldn't blame them. Jorge Benítez was a threat when anger took hold of him, when melancholy, like the one he experienced today, turned into delicately planned outbursts.

"I am a dangerous man," he said in a low voice, just to know if he was still capable of some trace of irony and complacency with himself. A dog looked at him, raising its head and pricking its ears. He was an animal of uncertain breed, woolly and brown, lying on the threshold of the Cortéz family house. He continued walking by, feeling that the dog continued to look at him as if at any moment it was going to chase him and bite him. He wished, for an instant, for the briefest moment that he too could have borne the name of eternity, that he would. Because then he would not have continued his way along the street, nor would he have turned the corner until he saw, just beyond, the unspoilt and perfect façade of his parents' house.

Jorge Benítez continued walking, then, until he passed in front of Santos' bar. The owner was sitting on a wooden chair, right at the door of his business, reading the newspaper.

"Good afternoon, Santos," he said, just slowing down a little. He had no intention of stopping to chat.

"Good afternoon, Benítez," answered the other.

Jorge noticed a certain distance in the treatment, the same that he had felt in the other neighbors since the episode on the field with his brother and his nephew. Maybe rumors had arrived, something was certainly known. That's why he looked towards his old house and prepared to continue the walk, but then he heard Santos' voice asking him:

-Do you know that new neighbors are moving in?

Jorge turned around. I sensed something bad.

-Where to?

-To your parents' house. They say he is a retired police officer and his family.

Jorge had accepted that he could no longer enter that house. It had been closed for months by order of his brother, closed and put up for sale. But there were houses that took years to sell, and as long as that state of things persisted, he could continue passing by the house without shame or modesty, he could touch the wood of the door and feel the moss on the walls in the palms of his hands. hands. Seeing the shadow of the eaves on the sidewalk and remembering his own body sitting on the threshold, with shorts and a naked, sweaty torso after playing ball, while his mother watched him from the door, with her apron and her hair tied. at the nape of the neck with curly locks slightly stained with flour. The clouds passing with signs of the coming autumn in their bellies of fog, the shadow of the trees on the sidewalk leaving free the breeze that refreshed the sweaty bodies of a Saturday at five in the afternoon. A child sitting on the threshold, drinking a glass of chocolate milk, watching the cars go by and the unwavering passage of nothingness and emptiness like a still distant threat advancing from the end of the street, perhaps from the vacant lot or wall where he was born or died. And he, the boy, looked up over the edge of the glass towards the sidewalk in front of him from time to time, as if he shared with the other Jorge Benítez, the man, who is also now looking there, the same fear and the same feeling.

But long before the end of the street, just a hundred meters away, a new family was going to move into the old house, and Jorge could see the moving truck that had just arrived.

"How is your brother doing in Buenos Aires?" Santos asked.

Jorge felt the anger growing by the minute. The house invaded by strangers, Santos' unhealthy and cruel question.

"I guess that's fine," he answered, as if that question were not I needed a kind response.

-Gabriel and my daughter were schoolmates, they were boyfriends, I think. I don't think your brother will be able to keep him there for long.

Jorge looked him in the eyes, and for a moment he thought he saw a glimmer of understanding.

"I hope he comes back," Jorge said. I'll leave it alone, I'm going to meet the new neighbors.

They nodded goodbye, and Jorge continued walking towards the corner. He crossed the street, reached the middle of the block and stopped. The

truck had the name of the moving company on the sides. There were three young men who must have been the employees and the driver. They brought down dining room furniture, an oversized wardrobe, kitchen chairs, floor lamps, beds and a refrigerator. The baskets, where there should have been clothes, books, kitchen things, were taken down last. When the wicker baskets were already arriving, a red Chevrolet arrived. A man with a stocky body and dark hair, with a few days' beard, a thin blonde woman and a boy of no more than ten or eleven years old with a sheepdog got out. The man greeted the employees and entered the house. The woman began to take the suitcases down from the trunk. The boy, always accompanied by the dog, ran to the house and disappeared.

Jorge watched all this from in front. Some neighbors had also come out when they saw the move. They greeted him and commented on something that Jorge did not understand because he was too attentive to what he saw, canceling out any stimulus outside of that event. As if he were watching the arrival of a hearse and the furniture were actually coffins. Four coffins returning to the house. Because those who had once lived in that place died there. The former inhabitants of each house in each neighborhood in all the cities of the world can leave by their own means, or they can disappear even without anyone having seen them move, but they all inevitably die for the house, for the home that houses it, and they they formed, constituted over the years.

"The four of us have died," said Jorge.

"What..." asked the old neighbor sitting in a chair on the sidewalk when he passed by. She lived in the little house with a rose bush on the corner, and she had taken care of him and his brother so many times when her parents were away.

-Nothing, I didn't say anything.

Jorge walked away without looking back.

That night he picked up the phone and dialed Nadia's number. The tone was busy. He made several attempts for half an hour. She couldn't have been talking that much, the line must have been broken or the phone had been picked up by mistake. He would go see her, he needed to hold her in her arms and bury her face in the crook of Nadia's neck. It was essential for the health of Jorge's soul to travel through that body as he had traveled through the streets of the neighborhood, and then reach the center, not of the city, but to the black hole that Nadia's body used as the center of vertigo and perdition, the place that absorbed the world of men. Sinking into Nadia's folds was like returning to the pool of warm water where he and her brother spent their summers. Those waters that reminded him of what it was not possible for him to remember and yet he had a presentiment when he raised his head above the surface and met the face of his mother, who

was waiting for them at the edge of the pool with a dry towel.

He put on a jacket and went out into the street. He got into the Torino and drove the thirty blocks that separated it from Nadia's sister's house. He got out of the car, rang the bell and waited. It was eleven o'clock at night. The street was deserted, the neighborhood was sad, with half-built or abandoned houses. From time to time the roar of a motorcycle exhaust pipe could be heard in the distance. Vague screams came from a nearby house. A light came on on the porch and someone drew the window curtain. It was Mariana. She immediately opened the door and threw herself against him.

-Damn son of a bitch! -She said while she hit him.

Jorge was slow to react, but when he was able to hold her wrists he asked her what was wrong.

-What did you do to my sister, son of a bitch? You were doing it to her all these months and she never told me anything!

He now he knew what she was talking about. The burns were the problem. He couldn't let go of her because she insisted on hitting him.

-Stop a little! Let me talk! It was a game, she always agreed!

Mariana looked at his face and went from crying to hysterical laughter.

-So she agreed to you burning her, beating her, and making her lose the boy?!

-What are you taking about? What boy?

- she was pregnant! I don't know what you did to her, but she hemorrhaged and lost him! Here comes my husband. He's going to beat the shit out of you.

Nadia's brother-in-law surprised him from behind and pushed him to the ground. Then he got on top of her and started hitting her face. Jorge protected himself with one arm, but without attacking because he remembered a similar episode, one Sunday outside the court: him lying on his back in the mud, defeated by his brother, after he had tried to kill him to take over the son, the house, the life that he did not possess.

Mariana grabbed her husband by the arm.

-Leave it, the police are going to come! What is missing is that they take you to prison when they should take him.

She and her husband entered the house and closed the door. The lights went out. She heard footsteps and voices of neighbors who did not dare to approach. She felt the blood in her mouth. She wiped her nose with a tissue.

A dog came up to lick her face. He got up and kicked him. The dog ran away with his tail between his paws.

"Take hold of one your size!" Someone yelled at her from the corner, and she realized that many were looking at him.

But Jorge Benítez was a dark silhouette staggering on the sidewalk. Maybe that's why no one wanted to come forward to help him or to finish what someone else had started. He got into the car, turned on the engine and the lights. He drove away accelerating at full speed and leaving a screech of wheels on the asphalt. He felt the hit of a bottle on the trunk. But he had already moved away from that neighborhood, and he was approaching the streets where he had grown up. He saw rising on his sides the familiar facades of houses and warehouses that he had toured and visited as a child. With his brother on his bicycle, or holding the hand of his mother or father.

Walls that would definitely protect him.

4

It is Holy Thursday night.

The night of the traitors. The night in which Judas has hidden among the olive trees, spying from the shadows on the arrest of Jesus the Christ. Not everyone can be so lucky, I think now, as I look at the vague and useless lights from the military base, lights that look like immensely distant stars whose luminous points are dying remains of something that has already been dead longer than I can imagine. Corpses that glow in the darkness of a field, a battlefield, perhaps. Because every military base is an imitation, a space manufactured to simulate the war whose threat lies latent and grows from the cracks in the asphalt that precariously covers the souls of men.

Not everyone is so lucky, it's true. Some of us must settle for giving people we don't even know names from a list stolen by informants who must remain anonymous. Only one man, Judas Iscariot, can sign at the foot of a rock on the Mount of Olives, just as Bautista Beltrame has been able to sign for years at the foot of his Sunday column in one of the most important newspapers in Buenos Aires.

Sometimes we usually deliver special merchandise. Beautiful human beings as Christ should have been, but not saints or virgins, but only beautiful because we have loved them. Like Gloria, for example, whose trail I followed like an animal after the perfume of her female so that in the end other beasts would snatch her from me. Bautista has been left alone with

his guilt and his remorse, and no one but he can pity himself. Because until now there has not been a single book or a single sentence in all that has been written that mentions or even suggests a certain piety towards Judas Iscariot. He has fulfilled his role in history, it has been said, he is a necessary link in the chain, others have stated. But tolerance or analysis do not mitigate resentment or contemplate forgiveness.

"Holy Thursday night," says Mario next to me, offering me a drink from his little bottle of Fernet.

I take a drink and nod my head. I know where he is going with those words.

-A long night awaits us, my dear J.I.

This is the only humor he knows how to use. He doesn't even change his jokes from year to year.

-I thought you would renew your repertoire this Easter.

-So that? The corpses are always the same, and they do not complain.

I look at him in the almost complete darkness of the car. His smile is painful, his eyes shine for a moment as if he were about to cry. Maybe he sees the hatred in my eyes, the tremendous hatred that can be felt for a friend. And maybe that's his role, I tell myself, to constantly goad me until he gets me to do something that neither he nor I yet know what it will be.

When they took Gloria away in the Falcon, I stared like a boy who has seen his mother run over in city traffic, and I could only do the only thing I knew how to do, write what fear dictated me. I continued publishing names, always suggesting, analyzing the political situation in the country every Sunday. And every Monday the television news invited me to expand on the topic in prime time, so that the entire family could hear the threat that the guerrillas represented. We had to end explosions in schools, we had to free the streets from the dangers that threatened our children. I was an asset to the country, they said so for a long time.

But I was still afraid. I went out with my car, and every time I put the ignition key in, I didn't know if that turn would take me to hell or to the heaven of the essential Judas. If a gunshot awaited me on every corner, if a car would stop while I was walking down the street to kidnap me. Or simply, as I drink my morning coffee, a slight fade would take me to the border that adjoins the land where the ancient gallows tree grows. He who is guilty dies three times: first when he kills, second when he is punished, third when he kills himself. Some may kill themselves before being punished, and then die only twice. But thus there remains a margin of hatred spreading in the world, that of those who cannot satisfy revenge. That is why it is better to die three times, the more you die, the cleaner the soul becomes, the more

transparent and diaphanous like an old cloth or an incalculably ancient veil covering the pubes of God.

Anyway, people started moving away from me. A couple of my informants died and I no longer heard from the others. A Sunday came when I had nothing to report, and suddenly I found myself writing an article about the general who would take command of the republic next month. I thought that that week I would go almost unnoticed, what I wrote was nothing more than what was said in other media and on the street. The next day they called me from the editor's office.

"Listen to me, Beltrame," said the boss, resting his hands on my shoulders.

I felt the cigarette breath warming my face.

-You write certain topics well, but not others. There are specialized people for that. Some are dedicated to sports, others to shows. Some are involved in politics, and you managed to stand out in a field hitherto unheard of. His thing is citizen politics. You managed to appeal to the feelings of the average man to make him aware of the danger. Reporting is not committing a crime, that's what you told them. But please, my friend, don't mess with the big boys.

My boss sat down again and told me that from now on he would leave my Sunday column to become part of the Saturday edition. I would continue my social column, but pointing to other things: reports of potholes in the streets, accidents, lost dogs, whatever occurred to me or I saw on my tours through Buenos Aires. He gently bid me farewell, and when I turned I heard a murmured word as he closed the door. Not said to me, but to someone else in the office, although I hadn't seen anyone else. Then I remembered that the aroma I had smelled was not of cigarettes, but of pipe tobacco. I imagined the pipe first, then the lips and a sun-beaten face in a training camp.

That night I couldn't sleep. I left the lights on in the entire apartment. I turned up the volume on the TV, turned on the radio and closed the blinds. I turned on the stove and the kitchen burners, and went to bed dressed and curled up like a fetus, clutching the pillow. It was the only way to feel safe, at least I knew that as long as I was aware of light and noise, life would not escape me while I slept. Life was so fragile at times, so susceptible to the slightest influences, that I did not want to think what would happen if at any moment the electricity was cut off and only the flames of the burners remained in the kitchen. I didn't allow myself the thought or memory of what the flames meant.

I took four weeks of vacation. I wrote innocent and superfluous articles for the Saturdays I would be away. I threw away the covers of the magazines in which I appeared as the prominent journalist of the moment. I

remembered the magazines that were in my mother's house. All dedicated to cooking, decorating and caring for children and the home.

"Sunday is my mother's birthday," I tell Mario.

-You already told me. Call her tomorrow.

-Let's see if I remember. You slept tonight.

-Whatever you want-. Mario yawns, he lowers the back of the seat and closes his eyes. He clutches the raincoat with his hands over his chest. After a while he opens his eyes again.

-I can't sleep, this shitty coffee we're drinking makes me sleepless.

-Do you want a pill?

-No, thanks. And tell me, what is your next novel going to be about?

-I have some ideas about a police story from a few years ago. A couple of whores in a neighborhood of La Plata. One kills the other, and the case remains unsolved, or at least it is resolved for the hell of it. The thing is that the murderer goes unpunished.

Mario looks at me with an expression in which I believe I read admiration rather than surprise.

-I always knew you had more instinct for news than many of the best. Talent to intuit the controversy without falling into sensationalism, he tells me.

-A popular intellectual?

-That's what the magazines say, right? And an escapist, I would add. You made your way as a writer to escape the big boys.

-I'm a cornalito, then.

-A smart one, until they catch you with a half world That's why you don't want to get too close to the docks.

We laughed together for the first time in a long time. Outside, from time to time, flashes flash on the moisture-covered asphalt. Changes of guard and some military orders are heard. The fog has settled over the car and over the field.

-Magazines. If it weren't for them... My mother bought “The Home” when she was young. She had the entire collection and kept it stacked on the top shelf of the closet. As a child, I messed around with everything when he had nothing to do, and I liked to look at the photos and drawings of those women with perfect hairstyles and impeccable clothes.

"They never existed," says Mario.

I'm not so sure about that. They must have been somewhere back then, outside my neighborhood house, where the figures of Perón and Evita hung in a corner of the dining room, where my mother ironed almost every afternoon listening to the radio or watching soap operas on television, while The winter rain fell behind the windows, and I stared at the street thinking about those houses I had never seen. Houses with front gardens of manicured grass and an impeccable car parked in front. Homes where children always smiled with their hands behind their backs and looking at their mothers and fathers who scolded them with a raised finger and a kind look. Fathers in suits and gelled hair, mothers in light dresses and skirts with clean aprons and hair tied at the nape of their necks. Houses of relentlessly perfect appearance, where nothing could be conceived as broken or damaged, and where nothing was missing.

-The curious thing is that those who wrote those magazines knew how to identify with common people. Along with the advertisement for the latest model of a refrigerator there were recipes and secrets to remove stains from used clothes or to keep the old refrigerator longer.

-In my house they bought car magazines, my old man was a mechanic...

Mario starts talking about his childhood, but he hardly listens to him. I am then the one who goes to sleep with the sour taste of the instant coffee that he prepared for both of us. I will dream tonight like every night, probably. About the new novel I have in mind, perhaps. But when I dream about the past, Gloria always appears, looking at me from the window of a green Falcon, gagged and crying.

5

He got used to passing the house three times a day, sometimes four. First at seven in the morning, on the way to work. At that time there were still no movements or signs of life inside. Not even the doorway light was on. Perhaps it did not work, or it was not the custom of the new owners to leave a light at the door, an ancient custom of guidance for night travelers in the old towns and converted in these times into a useless way of discouraging thieves. His mother would never have let a single night go by without turning on the lamp and turning it off at seven the next morning, while she watched her husband walk away down the sidewalk, already without the car in the time that Jorge remembered, accompanied by the two children. grown up, the four of them resigned to economic decline, to the sad designs that had made them lose, among other more important things, the old white Valiant. The man with his head down, the children tall and thin.

And although her mother couldn't see her faces as they walked away from her, she certainly knew that her children's faces had a strange smile, malicious and innocent at the same time. So alike, my God, she said out loud, but diametrically different at the same time, like strangers. Then he would close the door and return to the dining room to pick up the remains of breakfast, clean the mate and the café con leche cups, and since he had little to do now that his children had grown up, sometimes he would start reading the old collection of El home, of which she was proud. Her grandmother had left her the oldest copies, and later she had collected the magazine until her disappearance. She had built the interior of her home thinking about the photos in that magazine every day and night since she had gotten married. But the members of a family are not objects of decoration, she knew it very well. The men of a family are animals that are impossible to domesticate. They destroy the small ornaments, they devour the delicacies that a woman's delicate hands make, they use and throw away, without looking back. Sometimes they caress, but they don't know if they do it out of love or need. Men are dogs that cannot be carried on laps for long. They grow up and become hard and harsh, silent and distant. And they are not able to cry.

Jorge worked at the hardware store in the morning. At noon he returned to the apartment for lunch, and passed back in front of the house. As always, the sun fell full on the eaves, making the small front garden shine as if ready to burn the grass and bushes. s that were barely surviving the summer heat and recent abandonment. He had sat there when he was a boy almost every afternoon after eating, with an orange in his hands. His brother joined him sometimes, but almost always she preferred to take a nap. Daniel was diligent in school, more focused, his mother said. Jorge understood it that way too, but he was annoyed by Daniel's way of challenging him, of ordering things to him as if he were older. They were twins, and yet his brother's advantage was always there, latent and working effectively to his benefit. How he had achieved it, Jorge did not know. But his brother had made Providence give him greater strength, conviction and a family of his own. And now they had walked away from Jorge. Because Jorge was a stranger and a dangerous member who threatened to destroy them. Jorque had wanted, one Sunday the previous year, to kill his brother and take away his son.

His nephew Gabriel looked a lot like him, and he could almost see him sitting on the threshold again waiting for him to go to the field. But he knew that the image that the summer sun was now causing him was not of the boy nor of his when he was little. But another different boy, with dark hair, thinner and shorter. And next to the boy was a dog, the same one he had seen getting out of the car the previous time. They were both watching him, because Jorge had stood right in front of him, with his hands behind his back, his eyebrows furrowed, his face almost deformed in the intense effort to discern what kind of hallucinations the summer sun was producing in him. The boy looked back into the house. Would he call someone? Jorge thought.

It was better to leave before they became suspicious and called the police. He had to be more careful, he had been told that the new owner was a retired police officer. He had seen him, tall and strong, still young, with an unfriendly face amidst his long beard. He had seen the brusque manner and the strength with which he lifted the moving baskets. They're touchy guys, he told himself, and they usually carry guns.

Therefore, at night he decided to come earlier. The guy didn't work but he always came back at ten. Jorge walked around the block at seven thirty. There were kids on bicycles, although none of them stopped to talk to the new neighbor. He read with his back against the garden wall, while the dog licked his feet. From time to time the boy laughed and challenged the animal.

-No Duke, enough is enough!

Jorge and Daniel never had a dog. When the house and the family were at their best, his mother said that the animals made a lot of dirt, that they were a constant problem for hygiene. Dirty paws, saliva and excrescences, three points against which there were no possible arguments. They were inevitable truths that would have to be yielded to if one decided to have a dog. So it was never possible. His father was too busy with the paper mill, traveling from factory to factory, constantly making deals with friendly distributors and checking that the warehouse in Paraná was properly taken care of. They were not easy times. Illia's government was losing support. The economy was stagnating and the military was showing signs of discontent. Old Benítez arrived at his house worried, ignoring the rugs that his wife had placed on the sides of the double bed, ignoring the shower curtain that she had chosen in her favorite color. He ate with reluctance, and he had begun to drink more wine at the table. He never went beyond four glasses, but it was more than he was used to.

Jorge looked up from the memory of him and saw the new owner's car park in front. The man got out and the boy ran towards him, talking to him but not touching him. The father continued walking until he entered the house, he came out shortly after with a hose and a bucket. He started washing the car. From time to time he looked towards the corner, where Jorge had sat on a bench as if he were waiting for the bus.

Why had he arrived so early, he asked himself. Perhaps the woman had called her husband when she was suspicious of the man who watched them every day and at all hours. However, he felt no concern. That was his house, after all, there he had lived most of his life. What could be strange about contemplating the house in which one had lived his childhood.

The man wiped the car with a wet cloth, then threw water with the hose. The boy polished the chrome on the bumpers. The dog ran around or barked at kids passing by on bikes. The night was darkening the street, forming dark pools in the puddles. Sometimes the man stepped on them, but he did

not sink, and this was curious and peculiar to Jorge. Because the logic was contrary to what was happening. One must always sink into a well, that is why they exist, that is why they are abysses that God places to challenge man's intelligence. God knows that man is his stingy or stupid, he knows there is no middle ground. That is why he has built heaven and hell. And that street was a dream. The whole world is a dream of those who live in one of those two places. The dog is a dream, the car that now shines in the light of the streetlights is a brilliant nightmare of steel, the bearded man who ignores his son is a character with indefinite characteristics, a mold where an author has not yet placed the due peculiarities of character. Jorge knows that for this reason this man is dangerous, not because of what he suspects from what he has been told, but because of the multiple possibilities of what he is unaware of.

And above all, what both, Jorge and the other, ignore about themselves.

As much as what he didn't know about his father. When the scandal of the trash can fire and the trial had passed and he was able to talk to Daniel for the first time about his feelings, he learned that his brother didn't really know his father either. He thought that since Daniel was more interested in the business, and that the old man considered him almost his favorite, he would know more about his character. However, it was a surprise to everyone when after the warehouse fire, which they thought was accidental, the insurance company filed a lawsuit and took old Benítez to court for arson. This is how his wife and her children found out that Onganía's coup had ended up breaking the balance in the accounts, and the old man had no better idea than to play his last game. The fire was on April 25, but the whole family was home that night. Benítez had to arrange with someone to start the fire, a fathom thrown through a broken window for the occasion, a poorly extinguished cigarette butt. Neither Jorge nor Daniel could know, they were here in La Plata, worried because Miss Inés, the school director, wanted to make them repeat the year.

The old Benítez faced trial, the family had to avoid neighbors and unpaid bills. Months later they exonerated him. A deputy named Farías helped him, they said it was an old debt between friends. Farías paid or spoke, no one knew for sure, with the right people. He offered the father a job with a steady salary in a ministry as a desk clerk. Daniel took his exams before the end of the year and received his bachelor's degree. He entered a ministry office and was given time to study at the university. Jorge followed the regular course and graduated the following year, when he opened the first business of many others that he would have, a store selling cigarettes and candy.

They both returned home very late at night. Daniel sometimes arrived with the bride, whom he would marry and who would be Gabriel's mother. Jorge sat at the table, silent, listening to the voice of his brother, the new owner of the house, telling things about his work and his college. The father looked at them both, destroying the food with his cutlery, without eating. He

drank glass after glass of fine wine, delicately, until he fell asleep. The mother was too polite to get angry in front of her son's girlfriend. With her ash blonde hair tied in a bun at the nape of her neck, a flour stain on her cheek that made her look adorable and never unkempt, she rested her hands on her husband's shoulders, whispering something in his ear. She made him get up.

But Jorge couldn't bear to see him like that, so he threw the cutlery and napkin and went out into the street. The noise of his car, the first Torino he bought used, started at full speed. Daniel and his girlfriend were left alone to finish eating, commenting without much emphasis on what had happened.

6

I heard a shot, the next ones followed one another a few seconds later without interruption, like a long rosary prayed continuously and circularly throughout the twenty-four hours of each day of Holy Week. Strings of machine gun bullets, strings of garlic to scare away vampires, grains of rice joined by threads forming rosaries. Circles that have no limits by the very definition of their concept, capable of confusing their uncertain borders and uniting. The eternity. That's why death is also another circle.

The dream is one more of those frameworks. For this reason, now that I am waking up, the shots from my dream, the shots mixed with the screeching of the Falcon on the asphalt, continue to occur in the morning vigil. It must be six in the morning, and from Campo de Mayo shots can be heard increasingly farther away, less frequent as the minutes pass, until they stop completely.

Mario shakes my arm and I wake up with a start. I hit my head on the window and look outside. The photographers run up to the wire fence and shoot their own light beams, shots that in a way also kill, according to the legends of some old towns, because they steal the soul to trap it in a piece of paper. And this is also a form of eternity. Mario gets out of the car and prepares his camera on the hood. He looks at me with that uncertain and contemptuous smile, calm and collected, observing with contempt the young photographers eager to document what is happening. From Mario's expression, I know it's all a false alarm. It is a simple drill, perhaps training, or a way to distract attention. Inside, in the offices or pavilions where the mutinous officers meet, things happen that we cannot imagine. They have the weapons, and that's the only important thing right now.

I get out of the car, yawn, look at the cloudy sky, wipe the sweat from my forehead. I feel my own sour breath, the smell of perspiration in my armpits.

-I would like to take a bath.

-Ask your friends if they will let you pass. It's time to use your influence if you want a real scoop.

This time I humored him. If you want to talk about that, we'll talk until we're sick.

"I stopped being important to them a long time ago," I tell him.

-I know, they used you for a while and you are no longer useful to them. You were lucky they didn't throw you away.

-My name still endures. The name survives. That's why I'm a writer, I'm a best seller, didn't you know? - I comment ironically.

-How could I not know! And it was a good tactic, I told you before. But that's why you have to keep using it.

-Up to what point? Even names disappear if they become a threat. More so now, when they are hiding out of fear. They are more dangerous. Before they arrived in easily identifiable cars, you could even smell the smell of weapons, of sweaty bodies. Because no matter how much you are used to it, you always sweat when you are going to kill, the body betrays.

Since the shots are no longer heard, the colleagues return to their posts and greet us.

"Nothing happened," says one.

We affirm our previous assumption.

"I'm going to look for something for breakfast," Mario tells me.

Half an hour later, he returns to the car with a thermos of hot water, a mate, yerba and a package of croissants. He begins to feed in silence, looking at me from time to time. Outside it is quiet, hot, the sky threatening rain. The windshield is dirty but I won't bother cleaning it. Behind the wire fence, we see a platoon changing the guard. They have their faces painted, their rifles in a resting position, marching rhythmically and in perfect rows and columns.

-How long do you think it will last? -He asks me.

-Until Sunday surely.

-If you say so...

I start to look at him intently while I return the mate.

-Are you going to be saying the same thing every minute?

-Today is Good Friday, my dear Judas Iscariot. The night of the martyrs.

I can't help but laugh.

-Don't give me nonsense, please. Are those who planted bombs in schools martyrs?

-And also in the houses of the soldiers, don't forget.

-Yes, and...? Where do you want to go?

-To nowhere. If you think everyone deserved it, I wonder why you miss Gloria so much.

For ten seconds I remain silent. I count the seconds one by one because it was the only way to control myself, to at least try to do so. I close the window, then the one on Mario's side. I lift the lock on the doors. Anger eats my chest and I feel like vomiting. I approach him, grab him by the pilot's neck. I feel his breath almost on my face. He doesn't move. He just smiles listlessly, almost resigned, to what, I wonder.

-Of course I miss Gloria, but her name is too big for your mouth, you piece of shit. Your mouth full of garbage doesn't deserve to pronounce her name. Damn son of a bitch. If you name her again I'll kill you. I swear on my old lady.

Mario lets out a silly laugh, rare for him. He is nervous, or starting to get nervous. I know they can see us from outside, but there's no one around right now. And to my surprise, thinking that I have managed to control myself, I feel my heart racing and my fists not wanting to let go.

-Of course I miss Gloria! I would like to bring him back to life, do you understand me? I remember the look on her face the last time I saw her. He was afraid of me. I, who had loved her, who had entered her body so many times and held her in my arms to protect her, was the one she was most afraid of.

Suddenly I find myself leaning my face on Mario's shoulder, my fists shaking. I cry, and even though I'm making a fool of myself, I can't control myself. I think it's the first time I've cried in my entire life, and that name is the only one that has been able to do it. Even hearing it from the mouth of an unfortunate person, it is too beautiful not to be moved by hearing it. It is the sound of a lute playing measures composed by Bach. And no one can destroy such beauty. Her name survives, and also has the powerful virtue of destroying the emotional barriers of whoever hears or pronounces it.

Glory, I say to myself, and I feel a sharp edge in the throat, a cut and then a knot that stops the bleeding of broken arteries by the raw beauty of that name.

Then I talk to Mario about things that he has witnessed, but that he does not know about the way I have experienced them. He puts his left arm over my shoulders and pats me lightly as if comforting a child who confesses to his mischief. I tell you about the day I presented my first novel, a fiction based on a police case that I had read in a newspaper from a few years before: the death of a child at the hands of her mother and her subsequent murder by her husband. I called it The Drawing, and the publisher organized the presentation in a bookstore on Corrientes Street. It was a Friday night. I went with the car and left it two blocks away, in a parking lot on Talcahuano. The sidewalks were full of people waiting for a place at pizzerias, or entering and leaving used bookstores. The neon lights of the Coca Cola sign, a few blocks away, were an eternal flicker, almost like the imperishable lips of a whore opening and closing towards the great symbol that the Obelisk, obscenely and equivocally, represented. Its true origin forgotten, lost by time and gained by the imagination, always stronger than memory, and the imagination defeated in turn by the libido. What fantasies are stronger and faster than sexual ones, I asked myself at that moment. They emerge from somewhere in our minds and leave a trail stronger than a plow, more indelible than the mark of a knife on flesh.

The marquees of the theaters were overflowing with neon lights illuminating the enormous figures of the starlets, the faces of the capocomics and the sad faces of the old actresses. The car horns sounded in front of the traffic lights, and these changed, joining the game of the marquees. I had taken mom with me. We walked together to the bookstore, helping her avoid people on the sidewalk, making sure no one pushed her. She was distracted by looking at the windows and doors of the theaters with the photos of the artists.

"Come on, mom, we're late," I told her, knowing that she hadn't been downtown in years, and that that walk was perhaps more important to her than the presentation of my book.

She turned her head and looked up at me. She smiled at me without saying anything. I saw a shine in her eyes that I hadn't seen in a long time. I thought about the effect that downtown lights and noise have, especially at night and even when it's not a weekend. They are intoxicating, I told myself, one forgets everything in those streets, the past does not exist and the next day is a figure as distant as the next year. Only the music of noise, the splendor of beautiful women, off-color jokes occupy the same place as good books, and the aroma of pizza, beer or coffee is more difficult to counteract than the delicious perfume of the house. most delicate gastronomy.

And there we were, next to the bookstore window, making our way through the people who had come to see me. I greeted many acquaintances, others I had never seen in my life asked me for autographs. There were many colleagues from the newspaper, even those who no longer greeted me. The editor saw me enter and walked through the people to take me to the back of the store. We placed mom in a seat in the front row, she

began to talk to the others, as if she had known them all her life. Her fur coat was the same one my father had given her thirty years ago, and she only wore it when she came downtown. It was a special occasion for her, as much as those Saturdays when the three of us went out to the movies and to eat out, occasions to put on her coat and her bracelets. But today those bracelets no longer existed, she had sold them when dad died.

-Beltrame, dear, we have many people and all the media in Buenos Aires. Look there...

She pointed me to an old reviewer from a literary supplement. Then he showed me the journalists of a current affairs magazine, talking to a couple of well-known writers. He called to them and they came closer. We greet each other with the respect due between writers who do not know each other personally and whose work we may have barely read. I, however, felt admiration for them both. Suddenly I realized that something strange was vibrating in the air, a certain tension that came out of the eyes and mouths of the people when they addressed me. I looked around, there were several men along the walls and shelves, alone. I knew who they were, and I was sure that the others knew it too. It was a great social gathering, those who wanted to appear in the media and the photos giving their support to an event that had official endorsement represented the majority. The others, those friends or those interested in the book, were few, if any. And there were also the writers who had spoken and written bad things about me, but who needed to be present to continue publishing. licking, or at least to continue being alive.

The owner of the business was an old bookseller who did not seem comfortable this time with providing space for a presentation. I approached to greet him and he barely deigned to shake my hand. Then he disappeared behind a door in the back and I never saw him again.

The publisher had asked the two renowned writers to comment on the book. The four of us sat behind the desk. In front of each one was a microphone and a glass of water. The copies of my novel were stacked at one end. On one side of the store, a table displayed the copies for sale.

The one who spoke first, with a soft voice and careful diction, spoke for twenty minutes. He was precise and ambiguous at the same time. He highlighted the elegant and effective prose, praised the plausibility of the plot and the accuracy of the descriptions. The other took the microphone and said that he had not had time to read the novel. Everyone laughed because they knew the sharp irony of this writer. He repeated that he had not had the pleasure of reading it, but that he assumed that he would like it knowing Bautista Beltrame's skill in the art of prose.

-We have all enjoyed his delicious Sunday articles, and we do not doubt that the art of narrative benefits from his enormous fidelity to the truth.

The audience applauded and a smile came from everyone's lips. Then I realized I was about to faint, because I saw huge neon mouths with red lips behind the clapping hands. I was sweating, and the two writers looked at me, then the editor did too, and I became aware of the silence only then, not knowing if I had fainted and woke up again, or if the applause had simply stopped without me realizing it. I saw myself take the microphone and thank the words of such authoritative eminences. I said how pleased I was to have reached the proposed goal: writing fiction was a way to get rid of one's demons. This is what the protagonist of my novel had done: to kill is to clean oneself, the bad thing is that one gets dirty again on the outside, and then the blood penetrates again, it turns sour like curdled milk, and the smell becomes unbearable.

-It is not clotted and dried blood, it is a hematoma that becomes infected and then opens.

They stared at me for a while, I don't know if they were surprised or waiting for me to continue talking. I had returned what those famous writers had given me that night, I felt content despite being like in a prison full of books, filling the air with the aroma of pipes and cigarettes, locked up with a lot of people who shared my affliction and my sentence, but that in any case they did not forgive each other.

-Now, and before the refreshment that awaits us to toast with a wine of honor, we will read some of the telegrams that our honoree has received.

My editor read phrases of congratulations and wishes for success from various personalities, then smiled accordingly, and said:

-Here we have a very pleasant surprise. The new president of the republic sends a message of congratulations.

I don't remember the exact words, but the tone and form were something like "we wish the greatest success to someone who has proven to be a faithful defender of the republic, and we hope that since his new activity he will not fail to fulfill the efficient service he has provided." provided to the current process of national reconstruction."

There was more applause, camera flashes burning the stale air. People stood up and many approached the table. The two writers stood next to each other and allowed themselves to be photographed. Canapes and fine wine were served. I began to sign copies, and from time to time I glanced at the men standing by the shelves, who seemed to be waiting for me as if in a Kafkaesque story. But I knew that they would always be there just as they had always been even if I didn't see them. However, it was such a small place that it was inevitable to discover them sooner or later. And unexpectedly, I stopped sweating, I signed the books with a fresher smile, and my tension eased until I began to look more serene and spontaneous. I noticed in my editor's eyes that he thanked me for such a change in attitude, and I abandoned myself to the intimate atmosphere of the

bookstore, to that tone where each character seems to harmonize with the other, because everyone has reached the same conclusion. That was my home, I told myself. There was my mother, receiving congratulations for being the writer's mother, looking at me ecstatic because she had never before witnessed my success as a professional. Behind the doors was Corrientes Street, which, although trivial in its make-up, was an artery of the country's brain, and could not be completely abstracted from what was happening.

But inside I signed copies with words dedicated to each reader, as if I had written the book for each one of them, as if I lived in a town whose inhabitants Before they would have gathered around a hearth to listen to me read stories of ghosts or dead children, of frustrated loves or betrayed lovers, of the exaltations of life and what leads to death.

7

I had already noticed before that the door was sweating. When he arrived on Sundays after lunch to look for Gabriel and go to the court, he felt the wood covered in sweat as he ran his palm over the surface. It was not strange, summer Sundays are extremely hot, and wood is a substance that always preserves something alive, and in winter, the interior heat of the stoves produces the same effect but in the opposite direction. That's why now he wasn't too surprised to see how the door of the house had begun to bulge outwards. Effects of humidity on old doors, expansion of the wood that remains alive despite having been cut from its roots a long time before. Just as corpses have a memory of what they once were, because they persist in their forms even buried, and the bones decide to remain intact for years.

And now the door grew in a perhaps excessive convexity, threatening to break at any moment. He watched family members come and go all week, and even though he expected the door to get stuck, they opened and closed it without difficulty. But today, Sunday, the door was more swollen than ever, it looked like a woman eight months pregnant, that period when anxiety about childbirth reaches its limits and another month no longer seems tolerable. Jorge had seen his sister-in-law suffer from the heat and extreme heaviness during that summer when he was waiting for Gabriel. And so he now seemed to suffer the door of the house, he even thought he saw it breathing. That door was a belly, the eyes were the windows, the hands were the two bushes in the front garden, ready to wipe the sweat from their foreheads, that tiled eaves that let the remains of rain and humidity drip.

He wondered if Nadia had looked like that too, waiting for Jorge's child, the only child she would never have. If Nadia was eight months pregnant, she would walk down the street fanning herself with electricity bills in one hand and a shopping bag in the other, heading to the house where Jorge would be waiting for her. A house like that, the one that was his. A home like it appeared in the old magazine that her mother collected on a shelf in the library. From that magazine emanated the warm breath of the stoves on winter afternoons, or the faint shadow of the siesta in the summer gardens.

It was a good opportunity to introduce himself to that new family. Ring the doorbell and offer to fix the door. Talk to the owner and lead the conversation towards the topic of childhood. Surely they would have invited him in, and he could then see inside again, remember what he feared he was forgetting until it became something unrecoverable. He was sure that he would be able to see his father again at the head of the dining room table, that strong and confident man like a Virgil who led them safely through the paths of hell. That teacher who had tried to save them and yet had condemned himself, sinking into almost imperceptible lakes of alcohol during dinners. Red wine is dark as night, and wine lakes are mirrors of the starless sky. Sometimes you even seem to see a reddish moon in the liquid veins of the wine. And alcohol is fuel for fire. There, Jorge's mother was also in the house. She was like the legendary Beatrice, a wife who knew how to do everything: keep the home perfect even in non-ideal conditions, who hid the shortcomings with a cloth or a well-applied polish, the same one who was silent when the old man collapsed, limiting herself. to help him get up and go to bed.

Jorge needed to get in.

It was not just a desire, but one of those drives defined in psychoanalysis books as imperative needs whose frustration could destroy him from within, or turn into something so monstrous that he could not control.

He thought about Nadia, but no one would tell him where to find her.

He thought about entering the house by force, mistreating the boy they called Tomás, killing the dog and raping his wife.

None of this seemed possible to see the inside of the house once more. Because what he was looking for was the peace of the home before the collapse.

The afternoons and siestas of summer, the evenings behind the windows of winter.

His mother's voice humming in the kitchen. The silhouette of his father washing the car with a naked torso.

He had alienated his brother and his family from him. He had destroyed the only possibility of a future home.

But he still had the keys to the house.

8

It's Saturday morning. I open my eyes and find myself alone in the car. Mario is next to the base fence. There's a lot movement of journalists and onlookers who run towards it, and suddenly everyone drops to the ground or scatters towards the street or runs to hide behind cars. A young photographer, with blonde hair tied in a ponytail, takes refuge next to the car door. As I didn't hear the first shot, as soon as I rolled down the window I clearly heard those that followed, a continuous machine gun salvo.

"Hide!" she yells at me, but it's too late.

I see the bullet hole in the windshield, perfectly clean and perfect, from which the webs of a glass spider sprout. The bullet entered just below the ceiling; I look back, there is no exit hole, but maybe it got embedded in the upholstery. I'm not afraid, just amazed, I even make a stupidly banal comment about luck and destiny.

The shooting has stopped, but I can't believe they actually shot us journalists, because somehow this is all going to end well on Easter Sunday. I believe so, because it is the custom of military pride to give these demonstrations of power from time to time, to keep ourselves trained, to teach the dog of democracy who is the master of the situation. The hand with the weapon is like the hand with the whip, or with food, in the case of domesticated dogs.

For this reason, I think that that bullet that passed so close was not intended for me or any of my colleagues, but rather that it was a stray bullet, one of many whose path cannot be calculated no matter how much precautions are taken. possible. There is always a margin of error, a weightless zone where the impossible gains ground and becomes sovereign. An area between life and death, like the mother's uterus, or more exactly like the vagina canal. A hallway where we can get lost before emerging into definitive life or returning to the well-being of weightlessness. But both are extremes so similar that they cancel each other out. Life is not added to life, it is simply an energy that wears out from the moment it is born.

The shots are not repeated. There is movement behind the wire, some soldiers run between the sandbag trenches to the main pavilion. Some journalists take the opportunity to photograph them by zooming in and with a high-speed lens. I see Mario approach the car and feel the surface of the windshield with two fingers.

-Today I can say that I was born again...- he tells me. -I just went out to pee two minutes ago.

But the hole was over my seat, I point out. I don't know if he listens to me.

"We'll have to file a complaint," he suggested.

-So that? How many bullets were fired today? Hundreds, thousands. No one died from what I saw so far. Another pantomime trick...

I agree with you. I notice, however, that he is sweating. He wipes his forehead with a handkerchief, takes off the tie that he has been wearing loosely for two days. Plopping down on the seat, he grabs the bottle of mineral water from his bag and drinks for a full two minutes.

-Do you feel okay?

He looks at me and spits out the window on my side. His cynicism has returned intact, so he doesn't need to answer me.

-Weren't you afraid? -He asks.

-I would have had it if I had seen the shooter. But without time to think it is difficult for fear to be effective. That's strange, isn't it? Do you know any philosopher who has spoken on the subject?

"Damn son of a bitch," he muttered.

I'm not afraid now. There was a time when fear grew like my beard, it showed itself every morning and I had to cut it close so that it would not be noticeable, so that it would not give me tingles and chills, so that I would feel neatly groomed without the black residue of fear. But it always reaches us, it grows in the night and there it is, sometimes in the mirror, sometimes in a stained glass window, sometimes we don't even see it, but we feel it. It's a patina on the face, like the ones the mutinous soldiers are wearing this weekend. Because they paint themselves to hide, to act without being seen. And what is that if not a product of fear.

The day I felt the most terror in my entire life was the night of the presentation of my second novel. The intention was to do it in the same bookstore as the previous one, but the owner had refused. Rumors had spread about me, not because of my columns in the newspaper, which had already gone out of fashion, but about the weakening of official support given to me. A support that I never asked for, and yet it was like the sword

of Damocles on my back. Being on the margins of political news lowered my social profile, but the ruling party kept me under surveillance, and I also felt that others were also following me. Maybe they threatened the owner of the bookstore: if you make room for that guy, you're going to end up badly, they must have told him. That was the universal formula, valid in Buenos Aires as in Madagascar. Nothing new, really, neither is fear, but it has the peculiarity of transforming itself effectively. ically into something always renewed, never cozy, but shiny like a kitchen given to mom, shiny like a newly bought knife, splendid like a bomb in the hands.

The promotion was made and when the day came, I took my mother in the car to the San Telmo candy store where the presentation had been prepared. There were many people at the door, despite it being eight at night in a particularly rainy and cold winter. I had resigned myself to the fact that this novel would have less impact than the previous one, the subject was difficult and strange, and had allegorical overtones that could be interpreted politically, in different senses. Each one, depending on what preconceived ideas they had of the author, could reach appropriate conclusions.

The cobblestones shone in the night with the light from the stained glass window and the lanterns at the door. The flashes were in charge of witnessing the presence of some cultural officials, some fellow writers and a lot of strangers. On a table, I saw copies of The Face of the Monkeys, still lonely and resigned. I saw the face on the cover, the sick and isolated protagonist who was trying to populate the world with beings like him. He was a multiple murderer, as I had been. And it couldn't be said that we hadn't been able to choose. His eternal fear was being different from the rest, my fear was the same, and swimming against the current is impossible.

This time I did not see strange men, they went unnoticed or perhaps they had not come, as if the opposing side was a good instrument for eliminating me, especially because it saves the interested party's time and ammunition. The arrangement of the tables arranged irregularly made me nervous, I couldn't see who was behind who. People got up to look for things at the bar, waiters came and went with full trays. The photographers kept getting in the way of the empty spaces.

-What a success Beltrame! "How many people have come to see it!" said the editor.

My old acquaintances, the two writers from the first presentation, were not there. One had excused himself because he was sick, and it was an open secret that the other had disappeared six months earlier. The editor organized the mess and everyone sat or remained silent, looking towards the desk behind which a colleague from the newspaper, the editor and I had sat. The atmosphere was not intimate and nostalgic like the previous time. There were too many lights, the smell of food that contrasted with the

literary atmosphere, and the stoves were unnecessarily lit considering the humidity of the environment. I wiped the sweat from my forehead, not only because I felt tense, but also because of boredom and drowsiness. My friend from the press was fulfilling the purpose for which he had brought it to him, he was giving his positive opinion about the novel. The event was brief, few comments followed by the immediate toast and the service of the place. People ate, went looking for their copy of the book and I signed them. All this methodically, with a parsimony that surprised me. It had been a more popular presentation and without a doubt the book would be even more successful than the previous one. Even the most serious critics confirmed this to me later. However, something was bothering me. So much serenity, that is, so much civilized servitude did not liven up the well-known rebellion of writers. If they are characterized by something, it is by their constant lack of ubiquity. That feeling of feeling out of place at all times.

And that was what I felt, knowing that I was the only one with that feeling that night, which made me uncomfortable because of the boasting it implied. Although no one could see inside me, I was ashamed to call myself a writer in that place where not the slightest hint of art could be felt. As if they were all actors hired for that performance. It seemed to me that I was narrating, as well as watching, the presentation of a novel by an unknown author. I lost sight of my old woman, mixed in with the bustle of those who had just arrived. I had to greet each one of those who had arrived late, accepting their apologies. I said it didn't matter, and pointed to the table where the copies were sold. It all came down to that, it seems to me: a commercial ritual. No literary mysticism, no conversations between intellectuals, no controversy about currents and styles. There were no notable writers, only artists and journalists.

Then I looked outside, for a single moment, and saw the banners that a group was holding up in front of the candy store. Nothing could be heard from inside, but they gesticulated with their arms raised and angry faces. The signs simply said the only word that I never, in all those years, dared to say, or even to think. He had read it many times, he had associated it with crazy people, drug addicts and frustrated lovers. Anyone but me. Because I was an ordinary man, I used to say to myself every morning when I got up. e and every night before going to sleep. I was born in a normal family, I had grown up in a common middle-class neighborhood, my mother cooked and read Home, my father worked and paid his taxes. We hadn't even protested when my old man's body had to wait seven days in the morgue before being buried, because he had had the misfortune of dying on the same day as Perón.

I wrote, I didn't carry weapons. I thought, I didn't go out on the street to kill.

But the weapons are many, I finally had to admit. And there they were, calling me a murderer.

A glass exploded with a stone thrown from the street. Some screamed, others fell to the ground. There was a commotion of dropped plates and broken bottles. We heard the chanting of the protesters at the door, while we made a silence according to a hymn.

-What a shame! -said the editor, going towards the door to face them.

They threw another stone at him and he returned to my side with his forehead covered in blood.

"Someone call a doctor!" I shouted.

-It's nothing, Beltrame...don't worry.

Nobody wanted to confront those outside. However, these did not fit. They went from one side to the other along the sidewalk, with their banners raised and shouting “murderer.” All this did not last more than half an hour, the police arrived to suppress them. Two patrol cars stopped traffic, six men beat the protesters and they disbanded. They left the signs on the ground, and when we left, there they were, like signs on the asphalt for lost pedestrians. Many looked at me with resentment, as if they had not known that attending such events was a risk at that time, or perhaps they expected something else, perhaps they had come to see my blood and were now leaving feeling betrayed in their expectations.

I grabbed my mother by her arm and led her to the car. She was trembling, so I said goodbye as quickly as possible.

"See you tomorrow at the publishing house..." my editor told me, wiping the blood with a handkerchief.

I nodded and we got into the car. I put my hands on the wheel, and I realized that I couldn't drive yet, my hands were shaking and my heart sounded like a bomb. And I don't know why I thought of that word. The only thing I am sure of is that the network of language is a network that attempts to give only an idea of the intricate functioning of events. I think that word, and somewhere the device explodes, someone dies or becomes deaf, someone loses a leg or will simply carry the memory of the sound for the rest of their life.

Twelve hours later, the editor called me at home. He told me that they had planted a bomb in the publisher's office. Only the woman who did the cleaning had died.

He still had the keys to the house. Surely they had changed the lock, but what did I lose by trying, Benítez thought to himself. It was Sunday and the whole family was out. He looked at the clock. Three in the afternoon, the sun falling fully on the street, not a car, not a dog passing on the sidewalk, just the howling of an ambulance many blocks away. And he had been a resident of the neighborhood for forty years, and everyone was already used to seeing him wandering around the surrounding area without reason or purpose. He was turning into a harmless madman, that was what the others must be thinking. Therefore, he knew that he didn't have much time, that something, sooner or later, was going to happen. It was that anguish of Sunday afternoons, remorse together with despair forming a substance of unpredictable effects. An emptiness, perhaps, in the middle of the street, in front of the door of the house. Like a defensive moat similar to that of a feudal castle. Crossing it was almost certainly entering a trap, but his head weighed as if he had stones, and despite standing under the sun, he believed he was running driven by the weight of his head. If he stopped, he would die, if he continued, he would fall into the pit. And there were no other alternatives.

He got into the Torino and returned to the apartment, looking for the keys in the nightstand drawer. The same old keys with the ratty leather keychain that he had put in his pants hundreds of times when he was a teenager. Jorge returned and parked the car right in front of the door. Maybe he didn't think clearly about what he was doing, as if he were certain that time had turned back and his family was waiting for him inside. He opened the gate and stood in front of the main entrance with the knocker. Something told him that if he tried to open it he would fail, and that meant the very collapse of the sun that maintained the hallucination with the immense sphere of radiant energy from it. Furthermore, it had been his custom to enter through the side gate, through the hallway that led to the backyard.

The barking of a dog startled him. Then he realized that he had forgotten the new family's dog, which they had surely left guarding the house. But the barking was not coming from the back, but from the street. He looked back and saw the animal that had followed him a few days ago, leaving the Cortéz house.

"Hello," he said.

The dog wagged his tail, his tongue lolling out the side of his open mouth. Then she approached him and sat down next to him. He moaned very softly. He licked her hand and grabbed it between his teeth without biting it. She pulled on him, as if she wanted to get him out of there.

-No, old friend, you stay here and let me know if anyone comes.

Then Jorge placed the key in the lock of the green gate. It was an iron door, flimsy and rusty on the hinges. No one would have been able to stop if

they had forced her, and maybe that was why they hadn't changed the lock yet. The key worked, and Jorge Benítez's heart accelerated, carrying tons of blood to feed a body that was shaking with joy and stupor. Entering the house after so long, feeling the smell that he had experienced for more than half of his life, that aroma to which he had contributed with the secretions of his own body while he was growing up. The smell of sweat, the aroma of skin, the breath. The aroma of meals every noon, every dinner and breakfast and snack, boiled milk and hot chocolate, cinnamon and roast. The smell of beer in glasses left on the patio table on Saturday nights. The perfume of the old jasmine tree in the background. The aroma of fireworks at Christmas and New Year's Eve.

He felt a brief vertigo that made him lean against the right wall, the one that bordered the dining room. Even the rough touch of that wall in the palm of his hand was familiar, as if the memory had been waiting at skin level to emerge completely and intensely.

The house was waiting for him.

The house was a mother, after all, who awaited, free from human fatigue, the return of the prodigal son.

Things are more faithful than men, he knew that very well. Things remain, while men die and even memories become remains that fade a little more every day.

He came to the yard, walked on the grass, touched the old metal table, which had not been changed. He entered the house through the kitchen door. The key had not worked this time, but he knew how to open the side window. That was what he had done when he came home late from playing ball as a boy and he didn't want his mother to find out. He came in through the window and sat at the table, as if he had been there all afternoon. Then she saw him so calm and innocent that she couldn't do anything but smile and ruffle his hair with a caress.

There was the old kitchen sink, the same cupboards, the cleaning closet. The table was different, round and with only one leg. But he remembered the rectangular oak table that could be extended with a hinge mechanism that they had rarely used. It was always covered with a fine cloth tablecloth. His mother had protested countless times when she got dirty, but that was part of the ritual, she knew it, dirt is an immutable part of things. The dirt comes implicit with the beauty that is acquired.

He crossed the hallway, occupied by a large closet that belonged to the new owners. He entered the dining room. His family's old table was intact. They had not changed the furniture, perhaps they did not have the money to do so. They had told him that the man was a retired police officer, still young, perhaps he was sick, although his physical build did not give it away, or he had probably been discharged due to some legal problem.

The wall decorations were new. The old oil painting of the ship anchored next to a port was no longer there, nor were the plates of Chinese figures arranged in inclined lines. Nor the porcelain on the shelves, those figures of little shepherds and sheep that he had so often observed with admiration when he was less than ten years old. It was impossible to touch them if he didn't want to deserve his mother's challenges. He had only broken one once, and it was enough to not dare touch them again. It was a tragic night for him, she had looked at him with hatred, with a resentment that much later she knew how to recognize as true when she saw it again in other strange faces. It was then that she learned that family ties are not a guarantee of anything, that love is not necessarily implicit, that they are very thin and their fragility is inversely proportional to the need we have for them.

It was a lesson, just like that slap his father gave him in the street just once, in front of many strange witnesses of the humiliation, especially witnesses of his own failure as a child. Because he now recognized it, failure is not the loss of a crop, but rather it is another plant planted alongside the others. With one hand we throw some seeds, with the other the seeds of failure. But they are so alike, so identical, that it is impossible to recognize them until that grow. And it's already late, then. They have been formed as the shape of our body is modeled, the size of our nose, the shape of our eyes and the roughness or softness of our hands.

But the aroma was still there, the humidity of the bodies that permeates the walls and wood, the tones of light through the windows, the long shadows on the floor or the beams of the sun discovering the specks of dust in the air. The breeze that now came through the window was the same as it had been a long time before, because these things don't change much. The sun seems eternal, and the light wiser than the feeble human memory. And the objects that man creates to survive him understand these things, because their substance recognizes the atoms of the air and the sun, the howls of the wind and the aroma of a storm, the electricity immanent in a light summer breeze.

The wood and the sun. The linen curtains moved by the wind that once caressed the cornfields. The cement of the walls and the calcareous substance of the rocks of a cliff. The smell of paint and pigeon droppings in the yard.

Jorge Benítez was the substance of that house. His bones had grown by drinking in the scent of the morning, the warmth of the stoves and the sound of water flowing from the faucets. The voices of his family reached him clearly, because there are senses that make mistakes, like sight, so trusting at times, like touch, naive at times. But smell and hearing require darkness, and there was the darkness that memory requires as the end result. Memory not as an end, but as a path. And Jorge realized this, and he sensed that that Sunday, like many others, would not end well.

He heard the dog barking. He barely opened the dining room curtain and looked out onto the street. The new owners' car had parked behind theirs. He just realized that it was almost night. He had spent more than five hours inside the house, he had fallen asleep on the couch and he had dreamed and remembered. That's why it was so dark outside, and he barely recognized the face of the man getting out of the car and looking at the Torino with curiosity. The woman and the boy stood on the sidewalk while the man said something to them. Then he opened the car door again and made the dog get out, which ran towards where the other stray dog was. They began to fight, but the one who had followed Jorge was at a disadvantage, and he was soon on his back kicking to get rid of the other who was holding him down and trying to bite his neck.

"Duke!" the boy shouted to separate them, but the smallest managed to break free and ran away with his tail between his legs.

-We should have left the dog guarding the house. There are thieves. Stay here. "I'm going to see," said the man.

Jorge could hear the conversation very clearly, and when he looked at the dining room again he felt like a shock of reality, at least on the tangible and concrete level of reality that all the boasting that our eyes are capable of can appreciate. The interior of the house now seemed strange to him, full of objects and furniture, which, except for the dining room table, were different and had the personal stamp of other people. Other paintings hung on the walls, photos of artists or cheap reproductions of famous paintings. Ornaments bought at spas, photo frames with people he didn't know, vases and plates of terrible taste. And above all that smell of incense that he despised so much.

He heard the slam of the gate and the man's hurried passage across the hallway. The new owner had realized that the front door was intact, so if he entered through there the intruder would flee from behind. Jorge was trapped. He decided to face the situation, went to the kitchen and arrived just as the man entered and pointed a .38 at him that he had taken out of his jacket.

-Stay still or I'll kill you!

Jorge raised his arms and tried to explain.

-Listen to me please. I am a neighbor of the neighborhood, everyone knows me, I was born here. I lived in this house for almost thirty years...

-Get on the floor, you fucking bastard!

Jorge began to kneel, without lowering his arms, and tried to continue speaking.

-Okay, you're right. I shouldn't have entered. But understand me, please. I didn't come to steal.

-Explain that to the police, man.

-Please don't report me! I know you are a police officer too, do you think I would have risked so much if I were a thief? I even left the car at the door...

The man looked at him with a grimace distantly similar to a sarcastic smile, at least that was what he thought he saw.

-It's the first time they've come to me with such stupid excuses. And why did you come, then?

-I already told you, I needed to see the house again. I can't explain it better...

Jorge realized that he was about to cry. He had fallen too low and he didn't even realize when he had started to collapse. Anger attacks They were like epileptic attacks, they had degraded his mind little by little, erasing the already inexact boundary between reality and dream, reality and memory, between what should and should not be done if we hope to live in peace with others. The problem was, he told himself, that he could no longer live at peace with himself.

-Please don't report me.

The man lowered the gun and this time smiled with his whole mouth. Jorge knew that he was distrustful and suspicious, but he expected him to say something totally different than what he finally said and did while he smiled.

-Stay on your knees.

He left and closed the kitchen door. He heard him talking to his family, and then the car started up again. The man returned. Now they were truly alone. He closed the door, lowered the blinds.

-So we have a shithead who doesn't want to face the police. And your family doesn't know anything?

"I don't have a family," Jorge said.

-So, in addition to being a coward, a faggot. Because I know some faggots who have more balls than you.

Jorge realized that he had encountered something more difficult to cross than a ten meter high wall. A dangerous man with a gun in his hand. Someone used to getting their way.

-Look, this is getting weird. If you want to notify the police, do so.

The man now started laughing.

-So it's getting weird for you. I come from walking with my family and I find a guy in my house, who broke in, and it's getting weird for you. You're crazier than a goat, man.

Jorge lowered his head and arms. He rested his hands on his knees.

-I didn't tell you to lower your arms.

Jorge picked them up again, but they were heavy. My God, he thought, my God.

-We have all night for you to think about what is best for you.

The man approached him, with the gun in his right hand, and put the barrel to Jorge's ear.

-No Please! "I beg you for God's sake!" Jorge said with his hands together, trembling. He heard the sound of the hammer and then screamed. But a second later he was still alive, hugging the man's leg, crying.

-You're soaking my clothes, faggot. You probably pissed yourself, too.

He grabbed Jorge by the hair and made him look at his face.

-I'll let you go if we fix something first. I would let you see the house whenever you want, come visit me and my family. How about? Then we can meet somewhere, a couple of times a week.

The man looked at him with a brilliance that shone in the darkness. He was tall and stocky, the leg Jorge had clung to was strong and firm as a tree. The hand that held him had fingers that also knew how to caress, because they had begun to gently touch his head, pushing it like a lost sheep towards the place where he would feel protected.

The man's right hand, without letting go of the weapon, opened the zipper of his pants and with the other hand he brought Jorge's head closer to his crotch. Jorge resisted, but the other put the gun to his head again. For thirty seconds they struggled, but the man had more strength than him, and Jorge felt like the stray dog under the power of the larger one. Only he didn't have the chance to flee, only to surrender.

He thought of Nadia, of the house that had sheltered him, the warmth of the home that had protected him. Where he could hide from the street and cover his head with his hands. Close your eyes and feel the darkness that erases the dangers of the world while the warm warmth of home caresses his back just as the amniotic fluid filters what threatens the unborn.

And for an instant that he would never be able to measure, he felt something like simultaneous pleasure and pain, alternating in a game bloodier than the war between God and his demons, who mock each other

without mercy or rest for centuries, amputating themselves. body parts and rebuilding them to have someone to fight with, killing each other to revive him immediately afterwards. Forming the number zero of space without time.

Where everything is born. The origin.

The house is like a number zero, a womb of cement and bricks.

Jorge managed to get away and vomited on the kitchen floor. He stained the man's sneakers and stood with his mouth on them.

"Dirty bitch hiccups," the other protested.

Jorge raised his head, managed to stand up a little by resting his hands on the floor, without being able to stand up completely, and hit him in the abdomen.

The man didn't seem to feel anything, he didn't even move. He grabbed her hair again until she raised it to his face. Jorge felt the cigarette breath, saw the thick black beard, the dark eyes and the features so strongly formed that resistance was impossible. The other brought him closer to his face and gave him a kiss on the mouth that lasted ten seconds. Then he twisted her head to the right to an angle that would have He had shown his own back if he had survived. His own back, before the original and the abysmal darkness.

The body trembled twice before surrendering like a doll. The man lifted him on his shoulders and carried him to the door. Several things fell to the ground, but the street was silent. He left it next to the front door, opened it, looked outside, and picked it up again, putting one arm under the corpse's armpit and putting Benítez's arm on his shoulders. Anyone who saw them leaving the house would have said that Jorge Benítez was drunk and that his neighbor was helping him return home. But probably no one has seen them, because no one was ever known to report anything about the hours before his death.

He put the body in the seat of the Torino, said something, like implying that he was talking to her in case someone was watching them, then got into the driver's seat and started the engine. The headlights illuminated the street and he began driving south. When he arrived at the whores' neighborhood, he parked the car on a corner and turned off the lights. He saw several women on the next corner. He spoke quietly to Benitez's body, then got out and put him in the driver's seat. He rubbed the steering wheel and door handles with a rag.

He walked back to his house.

That might be a fitting ending for my third novel. What really happened later, there was no need to explain. Dr. Ibáñez, who was in La Plata at that time participating in a conference, was invited to provide his opinion on the body of Jorge Benítez, more out of consideration for a recognized guest than for a real need for expertise. Ibáñez confirmed what his local colleagues had already determined: death from cervical dislocation. Traces of semen were found in the mouth, but when Ibáñez asked for the sample to take with him to the laboratory in Buenos Aires, the nylon bag had been exposed on a stove and its contents were unusable. The forensic doctor presented his complaint, and he returned to Buenos Aires mumbling under his breath a protest that no one understood precisely, but that everyone knew related to the negligence of the provincial police.

The case was filed under the label of crime of passion. Some prostitutes were questioned, some neighbors who had known Benítez since childhood, even the few members of his family had to present his testimony. The body was buried, the file filed in the drawer of unsolved cases, and the memory of a man named Jorge Benítez faded away amid more important events. Because what was happening in the country surpassed crimes of passion. They were bombs and mass murders, a war that the subversives had declared against the country, and that is why the national reorganization government had come to rescue us all.

-That was what I wrote the day after the coup. It was a feeling of relief, I think. Who did not feel at that moment that the army was arriving just as we had seen in western movies the cavalry arrive to save the town from the attack of the Apaches. We were young, Mario. The army was an institution, and we believed it unscathed and incorruptible.

Mario laughs. It is the evening of Holy Saturday. There is a lot of movement of journalists around the base. The morning shooting has not been repeated, but it left the spirits hot and expectant. We hope, even I, that it will be repeated, because in some way that would break the unbearable routine of a vigil to which we see no purpose or use. If everything is prepared to end on Easter Sunday with the surrender of the rebellious officers, why this pantomime that can cause death. Unless the bullets are blanks, and they aren't, because the hole in the windshield of my car was made by a real bullet.

It is as if the performance staged for the great allegory of the resurrection of democracy is at the same time irreverent towards the sacred and too insulting to the military mentality. We are not prostitutes, and if we sell ourselves, we will sell ourselves dearly, they seem to have expressed with that display this morning. As I always said, they have the weapons, they decide.

-I admire your lucidity, Beltrame. This novel that you told me seems to be even better than the others. I'm serious, I'm telling you, even though you look at me like I'm making fun of you. I always envied your ability to reflect on politics and social issues. It's a shame you became a prostitute so soon, and sold yourself so cheaply to the worst types.

He had never spoken to me so directly, and even less with that calmness that took everything for granted, as if he had lived my life.

-You don't know the half of the hell I had to go through...

He interrupts me with another laugh that he has trouble suppressing.

-You look like one of those wimps from the movie about the Nurembe trials. rg.

I do not answer. I decide to wait for her to continue talking, for her insults to be greater so that I can end this night once and for all.

It's dark and the lights in the base are still off. The lights from the television cameras are like bonfires on the Mount of Olives. Two helicopters pass by, searching the area with blinding beams of white light, so low that they raise clouds of dust over men and machines. Protests are heard. I close the windows and we are almost isolated.

"I don't consider myself a criminal," I say, challenging Mario.

-I already know that, otherwise you would have shot yourself when you handed Gloria over.

My God, I think about the deep silence inside the car, in the center of my mind, which like a cracked walnut is the always firm point of an unwavering power: me. My conscience and God. And around the emptiness and nothingness. Silence like a huge gap where the name of Glory is only admitted to be pronounced in the company of prayers and the appropriate ordeal of blessed admonitions and oaths, of sacred rites and virginal promises.

The car is breaking down inside. A liquid appears to escape from the bullet hole. What feeds men is the same thing that feeds embryos. Tomorrow is my mother's birthday, I tell myself.

-I warned you not to dirty her name with your fucking mouth.

Mario doesn't pay attention to me. He continues to look beyond the windshield with his arms crossed, but suddenly asks:

-Or what? Are you going to send me one of your boys?

I throw myself against him and we start to struggle. There isn't much room, especially with Mario's cameras, the remains of papers and bags of food and the coats we carry despite the heat, and our bodies are robust too.

I simply shake him by the driver's lapel trying to get rid of that patina of cynicism that he covered himself with on Thursday before locking us in this car. He then chooses to try to get away, like someone trying to get rid of a cranky puppy.

-Stop, stop a little! Do you want to bite me, bulldog puppy? Or you prefer that I call you a police dog, or a Doberman of the armed forces.

-But what the hell is wrong with you, may I know?! Why did you pick on me just these days? If you hate me so much why didn't you say it in all these years?

-Because it was only three months ago that I found out what happened to Gloria. Your blessed and beloved Glory, of whom you told me the most excellent virtues when we were more than close friends. The nights you spent together, what she liked you to do to her and what you liked her to do to you.

I grab her left ear and twist it in my hand with all my strength. He starts to complain of pain but doesn't stop smiling.

-What do you know about Gloria?

-First let me go...

That's how I do it. Mario rubs his ear and starts to tell me.

-Three months ago a guy came to the office, one of the repentant ones, you know. He came saying that he wanted to talk, that we should do a report on him. He said his name calmly, he thought that if he appeared in the newspaper the soldiers wouldn't be able to touch him now. He was about twenty-something years old, but he looked older than forty. He was ruined, emaciated, half bald and smoked like a chimney. It was December 31, I stayed to take some photos of the celebration on July 9, and there was no editor. The man was a little drunk, but lucid enough to speak coherently. He couldn't take it anymore, he told me. He wanted to confess what he had seen.

-And what did he see, by God, what did he know about Gloria?

Mario lights a cigarette and offers me one with sarcasm. I snatch the package from him and crush it in my fist.

-Keep talking, idiot.

-He was a cadet at that time. They had told him that he was no good for training. He had leg problems or something like that. They had then put him to clean the barracks, wipe down the cloth, clean the bathrooms and latrines, the usual. One day they transferred him to the ESMA, and there he did any task, cleaning, errands, cooking, whatever. He had seen things, he told me, people, civilians who came and went almost dragged by the

soldiers. They did not take much care of discretion indoors. The kid did not have exit permits. The only thing he saw from the outside was the sky of the patio. They did not let him speak on the phone with the family, and they controlled his letters. In a few months you'll be out, kid, they told him. And he was happy because he had a good time, warm in winter, with fans in summer, well fed and in the company of the highest hierarchy of the Navy.

“At night he heard screams, and sometimes he couldn't sleep well, but even this he got used to. Some nights the gunshots woke him up, and once he was forced to get up to help control a riot by some detainees. That was a complicated night, he told me. Five detainees had rebelled and it was difficult to suppress them. There was blood in the hallways, then everyone was swept away. strated to the punishment cells. He helped open the doors, which were not bars, but doors like common hotel rooms, but when he opened them he smelled human fermentation. The detainees were thrown inside and he returned to the main room of the barracks. He passed through the door, awaiting orders. It must have been three in the morning, and there was still a lot of movement. He was sleepy and his eyes were closed from exhaustion, irritated by the lights and the smell of shit that had come from the cells. Then he began to smell the aroma of alcohol, whiskey and beer. He came from the officers' room, and when from time to time someone came and went he could see the lights on and several men coming and going from a room further back. One of them looked at the door that led to the hallway and ordered him to bring towels. He went to the warehouse and came back with several under his arms. He knocked several times and they only answered five minutes later. Let him come in, they told him, and when he opened the door he heard a woman scream. It was unequivocal. Only a woman could have given that cry among so many male voices. He came from the back room. He crossed the room, where several officers were asleep in chairs, their heads bent on their chests or resting on the table. They had their uniforms unbuttoned, two of them were in t-shirts and some pants were lying on the floor.

“He went straight to the bottom. No one told him to stop at the door, which was open anyway. The light coming from inside flickered like when the electrical voltage drops. He heard a continuous or intermittent hum, coinciding with the officers' intemperate voices. There was a table in the center, large and wide. A naked woman lying on top. The remains of the underwear had fallen under the table. He looked down there, because he did not dare to focus his gaze on what was happening on the table. No one had authorized him to do it, and he had been taught to fear what he did not understand, to flee and deny what caused him fear. The officers insisted that the woman speak, that she say something they needed to know, but the woman was gagged. The kid was still standing on one side of the door, in uniform, so he went unnoticed almost like one of them, because he had noticed that almost everyone was drunk, and that the voices and screams were sometimes incoherent and alternated with laughter or obscene jokes. He then looked up like one of them all, and watched with increasing...

interest?... I asked him, and he looked down at the floor and answered yes. He began to watch, he continued telling me, how the officers opened their flies and rubbed themselves against the woman's face. He couldn't see her face, but he heard her crying, and the kid was a boy, after all, and he was a man who had hardly known a woman. He felt his own pants get wet as he watched, still holding the towels in his arms.

Mario stops to light another cigarette from a new pack. I lower the window on my side, looking at the field and the barracks as if shrouded by the darkness of that cloudy, moonless night.

"Was it Gloria?" I ask, without emphasis of any kind, in a low voice, because I fear that something in the darkness is watching me, and that it will suddenly catch me if it hears me speak.

-Yes, it was Gloria. By six in the morning, they had applied the cattle prod five times. First on her breasts, then on her body, as if to have fun, to almost stimulate her. It was after raping her several times that they placed the cattle prod in her vagina...

"Shut up..." I tell him.

-...and a while later in her mouth, too...

"Shut up already..." he tried to shout at her, but my throat hurts as much as if I were talking into a tornado. My voice cannot leave the scope of my hands. These hands that have typed more names on the typewriter than the number of cells that make them up. And yet they live, and the names have disappeared forever.

-...they burned it, Bautista, they burned it all, and then who knows what they did with it...

I start to cry, drowning my scream in my hands.

-...Because at the end of the day she was dangerous, right? She had planted a bomb in a general's house, and had to be treated accordingly. A month after the guy disappeared, they gave me a good report. A list of those arrested on the day of the riot. The first and last name were there, along with her age and the profession she barely held. Gloria Sanmarco, 28 years old, school teacher.

I open the door because I'm drowning. I walk agitatedly back and forth next to the car, while Mario looks at me. I cross in front of the windshield many times, until I stop counting because it's of no use. Anger is damaging my heart, intense pain oppresses my chest and I only know that I want to continue living. That logic and reason agree with piety, that Death even seems reasonable after seeing and hearing the immense landscape of that room lost in time. But I still love my life. That's why the pain is too much to

bear, and since I feel like I'm dying, I only know how to run forward, ready to end the source of the pain.

I see Mario, that cancer of indescribable pain growing in the car like a deformed fetus in his mother's womb. A fetus that without speaking vomits germs tinged with pestilence and suffering. That's why I open the door and grab him by his clothes and throw him to the ground. I desperately, feverishly search for something, I don't know what, in the glove compartment, but my hands do know. They have always been my best weapons, the most valuable lovers who have successfully defended my life. The hands know, that's why they find the screwdriver and hold it, trembling not from weakness, but from so much strength that they fear losing control and making a mistake. Then I stick the tool into Mario's chest, several times, until I am sure that breathing is a memory, a forgotten gesture, a capricious and obscene mania that the human being must banish from his body forever.

THE POETRY OF INSECTS

They walked back from the cemetery. It was one in the afternoon on the third Sunday in June. A sunny day, but the cold hit the faces of those who came and went along the sidewalks of the avenue, wrapped in coats and scarves. The air had that peculiar illumination of winter afternoons, when even the light seems to freeze and take on opaque or bright tints like snow. In Buenos Aires it is very difficult for it to snow, it would be an occasion as exceptional as the invasion of a plague of locusts.

Ruiz looked up at the sky, as if he expected to see that plague, but in reality he was looking at the nothingness that is capable of simulating the void up there so well. The blue of the sky always seemed like a wall to him, and it was difficult for him to imagine that he could put his hands down and never find anything. A color is always something, the manifestation of something, and it was inconceivable that nothing existed beyond it. He had seen the illustrations of the solar system, he had contemplated in ecstasy the photographs taken from a telescope, and the darkness of the universe seemed like an artifice to him from then on, a scheme that every science needs to create to explain it in some way. There are such large gaps in science that the bridges of imagination are even more extensive than the small islands of certainty.

He may have become a doctor solely to confirm the doubts he had discovered while he was growing up. Doubts are also a useful survival system, the only sure thing on a path as unstable as life. At least for those who see in it something more than just eating, breathing and procreating. Doubt as an essential thought, foundation and chain between heaven and earth, minimally secure support on a boat in turbulent seas.

How, if it were any other way, to explain Cecilia's escape. That quick escape through a shortcut that he never imagined for her. Neither he nor his father had been able to conceive him. Now they were both together, Bernardo Ruiz and Cecilia's father, the old man taking the doctor's arm, just a little taller, walking, because it couldn't be said that they were walking, the sidewalk of the busy avenue. Because when you walk you go somewhere, and they just walked like someone who had a day off, and that's how it really was. Ruiz had asked for leave for two days, and this was the last. As for Cecilia's father, he had retired ten years ago, and had nothing to do. His wife had died in the same hospital where Cecilia had been operated on several times. While she lived in Ruiz's apartment, the old man had lived with them.

"And now where am I going to go?" said Renato Tejada.

Ruiz looked at him, but the old man's gaze was lost in a void that he had created for himself among all those people on the street. He wore a black camel-skin overcoat, with the collar turned up, and a well-worn scarf. He wore a gray corduroy cap and green wool gloves. He had the peculiar smell

of old people, mixed with the lavender he applied after shaving. That morning he had shaved very badly. Bernardo stopped eating breakfast and got up to offer help. They both looked in the mirror: one not very young anymore, with an unbuttoned white shirt, the other old, with a sleeveless shirt that showed off his bony body covered with little white hair on his chest. Renato's hands were shaking and as soon as he put the razor blade on his cheek he made a small cut.

"Let me help you," he had told her, but he did not want to offend the dignity of the man who could have been his father-in-law. Maybe he really was, because that's how he felt. Then he started shaving it. Renato abandoned himself to the care that the other gave him, like a dog that allows itself to be cleaned submissively. Ruiz passed the sharp blade over the still raw beard. ndante and white of Renato, but the sinuosities of an old man's skin are a difficult path to travel. There are ruts, there are turns and interruptions like on a mountain road.

Now Bernardo looked at him on the street and discovered, with the intense light of the sun, what the precarious bathroom lamp had hidden from him, the mediocrity of his task in shaving the old man. He looked at Renato's blue eyes, clear as water, eyes that Cecilia had not inherited, because she had her mother's brown eyes.

-What are you saying, Renato? You still live in my house.

The old man gave him a smile that soon disappeared.

-Do you think he killed himself, Bernardo?

-I don't know.

It was a stupid answer. He knew that a heroin overdose is never an accident.

-But you are a doctor... what did the forensics tell you?

Why lie, Ruiz told himself. The man with whom he spoke was old, but at the end of the day he was a man who had lived his time and his experience, and he was also and above all Cecilia's father. It seemed to him that lying was more complicated and dirtier than telling the truth.

Cecilia's ridiculous ploy had been a theater performance for herself: putting heroin in the insulin vials. She knew she wouldn't fool anyone, it was just her vanity. Almost like the staging of one of her poems, although this time it was a poem to be performed, not written. A scene that would repeat itself in everyone's minds without them having ever witnessed it. Only the man who had slept with her that last night.

Ruiz had looked for him at her funeral, but he didn't find him. Talking to Ibáñez about the autopsy, he had asked about that subject, but he had to be at the police station for background checks. She would go free, she had

nothing to do with it, and Bernardo was not jealous. Cecilia had left Ruiz's apartment almost six months earlier, leaving the old man like a broken suitcase along with those things we decided to leave behind.

-I think it was like that, Renato. I'm sorry.

-It's ok don't worry. If only I had seen her yesterday, but I hadn't seen her in so many months that I got used to it. Any separation is like a death.

I was right to tell him the truth, Ruiz told himself. He felt, however, how the old man's body shook a little under his arm. She didn't want to look at him again so as not to embarrass him, she knew that the old man was crying, wetting his badly shaved face. Ruiz took a handkerchief out of his pocket, but Renato was already drying himself with his wool gloves. He felt a lump in his throat, and would have wanted to say something, but he was sure that silence is always more dignified than any premeditated word. Even the bustle and noise of the avenue formed a more beautiful setting than the sound of an artificial phrase. Like a contemporary art painting, where a busy street is not a street, but the projection of the soul of each man and woman who has left remains and fragments of skin and hair that build the figure of a solitary man drinking alone, sitting in a bar stool in front of a counter, contemplating in the mirror the monstrous figures of common men.

They walked ten blocks. They waited at every corner for the traffic lights to change and for every car to pass, they even allowed women with children in their arms to cross the street before them. Ruiz walked slowly, surprised to be the same guy who a few days ago was overwhelmed by lack of time. Tomorrow he would return to his usual rhythm, the hospital in the morning and the private office in the afternoon. But today the rhythm prevailed that the dead insist on also making the living carry for a time. The passage of the coffin carried by four men in the cemetery is observed, and that rhythm drops many stones into many bags that each one, including the children, will drag throughout the day. Some more, others less time, but no one is saved from the sadness. And at each funeral they load us with new bags of stones; Even though we have abandoned the previous ones along the way, the new ones are added to the remains. Much later, the bags will be so big and the weight so unbearable, that we will have to stop. But since we are not allowed to leave the cemetery without them, we will then have to stay, now definitely still, perhaps lying down, or perhaps standing to contemplate our own body sinking into the earth; and then we will deliver the heavy bags to those who came to say goodbye to us.

The winter sun forms long, early shadows in the city. Ruiz studied his own shadow on the sidewalk, deformed as the curbs went up and down. The old man tried to keep up with him, but his feet stumbled, so he slowed down.

-Are you feeling well, Renato?

The other answered yes, but he was a little hungry. That morning he had not wanted to have breakfast other than a mate.

-Let's have something light lunch in that beef taurant that Cecilia likes.

It is not right to name the dead as if they were still alive. There's some bad luck in that. They say that when they say their names they are not allowed to rest in peace, because the hallway they must walk through is like any hallway in an uninhabited building, it has a more intense echo than any we could imagine. A name is always a call, and they turn to look at whoever calls them from the place they left.

The old man noticed, but said nothing. He squeezed her arm and they continued walking. Two corners later, they reached the bar. It was a place where the vast majority of office workers ate lunch, it was evident in their slow and worried gestures, wanting to make the little time they had left into an elastic band that couldn't resist much longer. They checked the time on their wristwatches, smoked one last cigarette while sipping briefly from a cup of coffee. There he had met Cecilia for the first time, when she worked for the magazine, and then also, when she had accepted that position at the refrigerator company. He had advised her not to do it, that if they were going to live together she didn't need that office job. It was not good for his legs to stand for so long, walking almost in circles in those small offices crammed with file cabinets and desks. Ruiz imagined her answering phones that no one wanted to answer, going from desk to desk with papers and folders, making her legs suffer, and on top of that eating poorly. She had even confessed to him that sometimes she even forgot to put in her insulin vial. Cecilia never dared to admit it, but he knew from the company doctor that she had fainted twice. He forgot about the medication and thought he would compensate by not eating anything. He had tried to explain to her that the body didn't work that way, that mathematical logic couldn't be applied to metabolism.

-She looked at me then as if I were a boy and she was my teacher, and she told me: “I could teach you more about my illness than everything you learned in books.”

Renato smiled, but he didn't laugh like other times. Bernardo shook the cigarette ashes into the ashtray and rested his elbows on the table. They were sitting by the window, and from there he looked from time to time at the corner where the table that Cecilia used to occupy was. She liked to hide there, where she went unnoticed. It was enough that they watched her come home limping, wearing her special shoes to replace what they had taken from her in the hospital.

-You met her when she was eighteen years old, Bernardo, and you amputated her big toe, if I remember correctly about her. It was ten years, it's not short.

Ruiz remained thoughtful. It was true. He had started by removing her toe, and he had ended the relationship right after amputating her leg. Many things had happened between both events, and they had also been lost, like that leg that was no longer anywhere. It's funny, he said to himself, as the waiter spread the tablecloth on the table, then the transparent plastic, the cutlery, the napkins, the glasses, that he would almost never have thought what was happening to those amputated fragments. He usually cremated them as pathological waste, because he had never known of anyone who claimed them. In addition, most of the parts were gangrenous. They were, however, like envoys who went forward to explore death, and although they did not return, they became small niches where death gloated as in a small puppet theater. Not the great scenarios of collective deaths: accidents, natural disasters, nor the intimate scene of someone dying in a room measuring three by four meters, alone and shaken by panic. But a toy death, but undoubtedly real, because the rot is as suffocating as in its older sisters, and the larvae grow as precociously as in the others.

-Do you remember when you and her wife brought her to my office? She had her hair in a ponytail, the saddest brown eyes I had ever seen, and a hunched back.

-You patted her and told her: “Girls who are so pretty never have to look like that, it makes them look ugly.”

-But she answered me with her usual insight: “pretty girls look prettier if they think.”

-How he cried when we told him that they had to amputate his finger...

-If I remember. She rested her head on my smock, and I confess, no patient had ever done that. How can I not fall in love with her daughter, then.

Cecilia had the body and mind of a woman even at that time. She didn't look like a teenager, but rather an almost old woman at times. Her complexion was white and pale, her eyes small and brownish in color, sometimes dark green depending on the light that shone on her at a certain moment.

-Was it necessary to cut off her leg now? ra? We would have had her at home until yesterday if they hadn't gotten into a fight.

Ruiz looked at Renato and couldn't help reproaching himself.

-I already told you and her, she was getting gangrenous. She would have died in less than fifteen days.

-But she would have died with us...

Ruiz did not answer. To do so he would have had to remember every moment spent with Cecilia, every argument and every kiss. He didn't want

to go through that again. He just wanted to have a light lunch, stay silent and watch the world around him continue on its way without needing him. The street and the people who were not waiting for him, the cars that came and went like hearses or ambulances. They were all sick and didn't know it, they were all traveling to or from the cemetery or the hospital. In the middle, there were houses, shelters where you could sleep and protect yourself from the weather, beds where living was confused with the satisfaction of instinct, books in which some traveled beyond or further than real time. Life is as extensive as the limits of a playing field, it can be a baseball field or a chess board. But it is so difficult to remember the rules, Ruiz said, that some quit before the end of the game.

-I didn't think she was such a coward...

Renato looked him in the eyes, angry for the first time. Her veiny, freckled hands were suddenly trembling. He accidentally knocked over the wine glass and started crying.

-She was never a coward, son of a bitch, she endured everything she could endure. You cut her again and again and she held on every time...

Ruiz grabbed his hands tightly and asked for forgiveness. The people at the other tables looked at them. Right under the light of the window, in the intense sun of the first afternoon, they looked like two opponents in an arm wrestling match.

The old man calmed down, but Ruiz was no longer calm. He let go of her hands and prepared to eat his meat dish, then he noticed that he had a bad smell. He turned it over and saw the gray larvae.

-Damn, what a shitty restaurant.

Renato looked at him surprised, but Ruiz had already called the waiter.

-Look at this meat, boss, do you think I can eat this?

The waiter looked at the plate and didn't understand.

-It's full of worms!

The other one took the food. They brought him another one and this time he found nothing strange.

Ruiz had lost his usual calm. His small figure, with firm back and strong arms, does not need many exercises to stay well. His curly brown hair combined pleasantly with his straight nose and delicate chin. He seemed younger than his age, and perhaps that was why, at twenty-five years old and having just graduated as a doctor, he had made Cecilia fall in love with him.

Now, however, he was ten years older, with some gray hair and a tense expression that had been forming for several years, molding itself to his face as if it were not born from his own emotional state, but rather a mask setting as the liquid that constituted it spread over him. Falling from somewhere in the sky, perhaps from the hells that are almost always born as worlds condensed from the clouds of our thoughts.

"A coffee, Renato?" He asked, but the old man shook his head, brooding with his gaze lost behind the window and drumming his fingers on the table. The melody he carried was invented, Ruiz had learned this from Cecilia, and it was a habit that irritated her. But he was indifferent to her, and sometimes he even liked her. Listening to the tapping of the old man's fingers on the wooden table, his imagination, or rather his soul, was transported to patios and kitchens in suburban neighborhoods, to wicker tables and chairs and people drinking mate on summer afternoons. Memories of people and times that he didn't think he had known and yet he longed for. Bushes in the gardens where the dogs ran and slept lying on the grass, old women who got up from their kitchen chairs and put on their linen sweaters when they felt the first cool breeze of the afternoon.

The old man was angry with him, and Ruiz reproached himself for saying what he said. He wondered if he really meant it, but at that moment anger and jealousy prevailed. Cecilia had abandoned him, and shortly after she died in bed with another man. She had left the old man in charge and a whole load of guilt and recriminations. And now she was free, and he was bound to what she had always been bound to. She had removed the chains from her sick body, and he remained tied to the world not by chains, but by the weight of an immense idea. An idea made of flesh and bones, blood and entrails capable of fermenting all imagined creatures. An idea of complete happiness or complete horror.

That was the body for Cecilia. That's why she had complemented each other so well, living those years almost without needing to explain or say things to each other. There were only actions between them, making love, preparing the syringes, eating and caressing each other, and above all looking at each other. Beings that used their voice for the world exterior, work and social routine. The only true communication is with the body, she told him when they were in bed, looking at the ceiling. He watched the drawings of flies walking on the ceiling, she searched for what she claimed to have given up.

"A coffee," Ruiz asked the waiter.

They brought him the well. He poured some sugar. He smiled to himself, not looking at anyone, least of all the old man. Poor Cecilia, sugar was poison for her. Then he continued to pour more into the cup, and the liquid overflowed and the cup became a wet sugar cup. But he continued pouring it until the jar was gone and he looked up. Everyone was watching him. He calmly put down the empty container, took out his wallet, left more than

enough to pay the bill, and stood up. He thought he saw, for a moment, some crutches leaning in the corner behind Cecilia's table. He stopped at the door for a moment, they saw him look at the floor and stomp on something, as if he were killing insects. They heard him utter a couple of obscenities and then stop at the door.

-Come on, old man.

Renato stood up without accepting help from the waiter and took the arm of the man who could have been his son-in-law. They watched them walk away down the sun-swept sidewalk, walking slowly as if they were walking not along a city street, but on a dirt road, wooded and cold on a cloudy day.

It was three in the afternoon when they arrived at the apartment. They went up the elevator in silence and with each one's gaze focused on the floors that followed one after another. Through the bars you could see the empty paliers and the closed doors. They heard the echo of one that had just closed abruptly, perhaps because of the draft, and then the voice of a young woman calling for someone, perhaps a child, and they both knew what the other was thinking at that moment. Too many times they had heard Cecilia's voice ringing in the hallway, and the clacking of the soles of her special shoes echoing throughout the building.

They entered, and Ruiz closed the door. They had closed the blinds when they left and everything was dark. He turned on the light in the hall and went to raise the blinds on the window that overlooked the balcony. Renato fell into the armchair, without taking off his coat. Ruiz looked at him as he got rid of his coat and then his jacket and tie. He sat up and untied his shoelaces. When he freed himself from them, tossing them aside, he breathed a sigh of relief.

He realized the silence, the cold and the hatred that separated them at that moment, invaders that threatened to settle permanently if he did not expel them now, right now, with words and actions that demonstrated that there were people there who were still alive.

"I'm going to turn on the stove," Ruiz said.

He got up and went to the kitchen to look for matches. When he returned to the living room, Renato was taking his pipe out of the inside pocket of his jacket and filling it with tobacco. When the stove was lit, he approached the old man and gave him a light for his pipe.

-Thank you son.

The old man held him by the hand.

-It's okay, Renato, everything is going to be okay. I'm going to take care of him, don't worry.

But did the old man really trust him, or was it just because he had no one else to confide in, his growing weakness, and those tiny insects of old age that emerge to wrinkle our skin, turn our bones into glass tissue, and turn the machinery of the body into irreparable scrap. Where better could he be than in the house of a doctor, to receive the substances that would hardly repair the ravages of those beings that came forward, like messengers, from the earth that gives off the fumes of manure from the future.

-When he wants some mates, let me know. I'm going to take a shower and then read something in the study.

Renato nodded his head. He left him in the living room enjoying his pipe. Ruiz undressed in his room, threw the clothes on the bed, that bed where Cecilia had not slept for six months. He grabbed a towel and walked into the bathroom. He looked in the mirror. He felt clear, but he still had no desire to go to work tomorrow. However, he had a surgery scheduled for a month, which did not allow for postponement. He got under the hot shower and stayed for almost half an hour, not thinking about anything, just letting the water run over his body, feeling the intense steam that filled the bathroom, knowing even then that just as he was, naked and with nothing else. that his own body, he was the poorest man in the world. Because the body is not a belonging, it is simply us. He often argued with Cecilia over this fact. She thought that the body enslaved us, that it was a chain with the world from which we cannot break free without paying a price. Life and the body are different things, but most of the time they intermingle like those microorganisms that emit pseudopods to move or invade other beings. Ruiz said that we are one, an indivisible anatomical body that dissolves in the grave. Life, for him, is the life of the body, and included, of course, the mind, just one more part of its different compartments and functions.

Ruiz's theory was, by definition, conflict-free.

But Cecilia's theory was, then, something very similar to a war.

He turned off the faucet and began to dry himself. With the towel he cleaned the fogged mirror, and saw a cockroach crawling through the ceiling. He climbed onto the toilet seat and tried to kill her with the towel, but he slipped and fell to the floor.

"Are you okay?" Renato asked from the other side of the door.

-Yes, I slipped, nothing more.

He looked up and the cockroach was still there. He got up again. He again threw the towel in a ball against the ceiling, hit its target and fell again. He checked the cloth for the insect, but it was clean. He searched the floor, and found nothing. He forgot about it to rub disinfectant on the scrape on his knee. How many times, he thought, had he told Cecilia to take care of her wounds. Any bruise could turn into an ulcer. That's how it had happened

the first time he had to amputate it; The second time, she had injured the sole of her foot on a wire, and when she turned to him, the infection was too advanced. He had not seen her since her first hospitalization. During those three years she had taken care of herself. It was the time of his work at the magazine, and he felt happy. But when she entered the office with her skin bandaged and smelling of putrefaction, he already guessed, without needing to open the bandages, that her foot was unsalvageable.

She looked at him that day as if begging him not to do what she was thinking. This time she had come without her parents. He remembered her well, it was difficult to forget a teenager crying on her doctor's coat. They talked for a while, then she calmed down and started telling him about her work, about the articles she wrote.

"What are they about?" Ruiz asked, while he treated the wound and wrapped the foot in bandages as if it were a newborn baby.

-Of things I see on the street, situations, a little bit of everything. But there are things that don't let me publish. Opinions, you understand? with which the publisher does not agree.

-And can I ask what opinions?

-Criticism of the world, of the people. There's something hateful about people, don't you think, doctor?

Ruiz looked at her as if she were seeing a superb mind. He had come to the same conclusion as her only after certain years of work, reading and experience. Trust, or rather hope, is difficult to lose sometimes, it clings to the temperament of some and does not want to die along the way. But there are skins, like Cecilia's, where she slips, she makes efforts to hold on with small insect legs, but she finally dies crushed.

-You should call me by now, Cecilia, I'm not many years older than you.

She smiled at him, as if she no longer hurt, as if she no longer had the feeling that she was soon going to die. A foot that was taking on a dark tone and that had to be eliminated to preserve the rest that was still alive.

Bernardo came out of the bathroom and saw Renato putting a record on the stereo. For some, it would have been a sign of insensitivity. For Cecilia's father, it was a tribute. While he was dressing, Ruiz listened to the overture of an opera. He went behind Renato's chair and asked him if he was okay. The smell of tobacco and the music were a comfort to the old man. He went to the study, left the door a little open, he didn't mind the music to study. He wondered what the comfort was to him. He looked at the emptiness of his study room. Despite being full of shelves on all four walls, the desk covered with papers, open books and a lamp, green carpets and wooden

moldings bordering the ceiling, it supports marble books, the paintings with the doctor's degree and the certificates Of the postgraduate courses, only the smell of tobacco and Verdi's music were able to make him cry, while he listened to Margaret's aria from La traviata. That dark and serene languor of a voice that is lost in the middle tone of the singer's register, cushioned by the cellos and the soft murmur of the bassoons. A voice that knows she is going to die.

She sat behind his desk, wiped her face, and opened the book in front of him. On page 304 of the anatomy book was a piece of paper with a name and a quote. Tomorrow is the surgery, Bernardo thought, I have to prepare, at least read a little. He had postponed that patient's operation for two days because of Cecilia's funeral. The man had malignant polyps in his intestine and was going to have them removed. He corrected the position of the light on the book. He suddenly saw shadows fluttering across the page. They were moths of the light. He crushed a few in his hands and went to close the windows. She was sundowning prematurely. He wondered if Renato would want to have some mates, but he decided to leave him alone with his music. Verdi continued his work of redemption and forgiveness, his endless work of rescuing souls by taking them from one place to another, from sadness to sadness, from fury to fury, from pain to pain. And the result was the great melancholy of his sopranos and his baritones, the anger of his basses and the anguish of his tenors.

He poured his gaze over the anatomy pages. He reread what he already knew by heart, contemplated the red print of the muscles, the white bones like pieces of fine architecture, the tortuous branching of the trees of arteries and veins. He turned the pages as if he were moving membranes that were dissolving in his hands. And within the beauty the tireless worms coexisted. Waiting, patient like vagabonds, insistent like detectives, invisible like spies. Occupants of all positions because all shapes and fabrics are pleasing to them. Ubiquitous and competent like God.

At eight o'clock at night Renato found him asleep, with his hands on the book and his head resting on them. The music had ended an hour earlier. The protagonist died and two men lamented. But Ruiz did not know that the old man was watching him sleep, he was now standing on a plain, contemplating the facade of a country house. The house looked like a human head, not because it had the shape, but each part could be imagined as the parts of a face. For example, Ruiz told himself, speaking out loud, although no one was there to hear him, the door would be the mouth, vertical instead of horizontal, as if making a histrionic face of astonishment, mannered, perhaps childish (it could well be a head). as a child). The symmetrical windows on the sides of the door were the eyes, but the whitewashed wooden shutters were closed. The gabled roof, with darkened

Spanish tiles, could represent a uniform and conservative hairstyle. The small eave that protruded above the door, the nose, almost turned up. Now he was better oriented, he could easily be a boy's head.

He approached the house a little, looked to the right side to see if there was a backyard. He saw a side garden, but it wasn't quite a garden. There was a barbed wire fence with wooden posts at every meter, a narrow vegetable patch, a washing basin along the wall, and two basins. Some ropes and sheets peeked out from behind, in what must have been the backyard. In the garden, there was an old man sitting on a wooden chair with a seat of woven straw. He had his eyes closed, just like the house. But on the side wall there was a door that shook even when there was very little breeze. It was actually the screen door that shook, slamming again and again against the frame and then against the wall, in a 180-degree round trip. And with each blow, the old man seemed to startle, because he raised his head a little and then dropped his chin back to his chest. But he didn't open his eyes.

Then Ruiz discovered the dog between the old man's legs. The fading light of the afternoon, the shadow of the house, the man's body and gray clothes had hidden him until then. The dog didn't move either, and he was strange. But suddenly the sound of an engine was heard. Ruiz turned around. A bus was approaching along the dirt road, kicking up a large tail of dust. Then the dog barked. Ruiz saw him get up and run towards the bus, which was still far away. The old man opened his eyes and shouted the dog's name, calling him to come back. He stood up and began to walk clumsily towards the exit of the garden. The dog jumped over the barbed wire and ran onto the road. He was a white, robust dog, but Ruiz only managed to see him from behind as he walked away. He could, however, see the old man clearly, who was walking holding onto the wire as if it were a railing, but he did not seem to realize that his hands were bleeding. Then he tripped and fell, hurting his face. He got up and continued walking towards the road. The dog had already reached the tree that marked the bus stop. It was an elm, large and slender, mercifully enveloped in an aura of mist and the soft gray tones of dusk. Time had passed very quickly, the old man continued walking and the bus continued approaching the tree. The dog wouldn't stop barking, but he seemed blind, because he was barking at the air instead of at the vehicle. He seemed to recognize large distances but not small ones. Then the cloud of dust got closer, because the bus was stopping. The cloud continued at the same speed and enveloped everything until it hid even the microphone. The dog disappeared into the cloud, but he continued barking until his voice was swallowed up by the noise of the engine. Then the collective emerged another once and stopped, this time carrying a fragment of white skin on the right front wheel.

The dust from the road began to settle. The driver did not get off the bus. In reality, Ruiz couldn't see if there was anyone else in the vehicle, and he didn't even see the driver behind the dirty windshield.

The old man stopped suddenly, made the sign of the cross over his wounded and blood-stained face. He was ten meters from the tree, and did not try to get any closer. Then he fell rigid on the grass, hard as if he had already been dead before and was only waiting for the death of his dog to finally surrender.

Nothing was moving now, not the leaves of the tree, not the old man, not the bus. Only the earth that returned to prostrate itself in its element, after having been disturbed. He returned to settle in his ancestral home, placing his members throughout the length and breadth of the field. The earth extended its arms to lie down after the capricious annoyances of men, and this time he took two pieces of clothing in exchange for that daring.

He was taking a blind dog.

And he was carrying a man on his lap.

2

Ruiz woke up the next morning, only with the dubious memory of having left his study very early in the morning and then undressing and going to bed. Even the morning light and the things in his room seemed more unreal than the dream he had had. He got rid of the sheets and the flower-print blanket that Cecilia had chosen to celebrate the fifth year of living together. Now he changed the sheets only once a month, when a woman came to clean the apartment. Today was probably the right day, he wasn't sure. He still tore the sweaty sheets off the bed and left them in a ball on the mattress. He raised the blinds and opened the windows. He heard the morning traffic, and a dog barking. He thought of the dog from his dream, so similar to those strange animals he had seen in La Plata when he worked there.

He took a shower. Looking in the mirror, he barely combed his hair with his hands, the short curls always arranged themselves. Then he shaved and dressed. He packed the briefcase. Renato had already gotten up and was preparing breakfast, coffee with milk and toast. The kettle with hot water on the stove. He was brewing mate for Ruiz, who didn't drink dairy.

-I'm late, I have surgery and I'm late. Just a few mates...

Renato handed him one, and while he took it, their gazes met in silence.

-He slept well?

-More or less. Did you have nightmares? Today you complain.

-A bad and stupid floor, what do I know. The truth is that I don't feel like going to work, but I think it will do me good to distract myself.

He said goodbye after the first mate. He didn't want to talk to the old man. His face reminded her of the man in the dream.

He left the car in the hospital parking lot and walked straight into the reception. The secretaries greeted him. Some, who knew the cause of his absence, offered their condolences. Others, who had also found out but were no more than work acquaintances, looked at him as he walked somewhat hunched towards the elevator. He stared at the metal door, staring at the floor number on the indicator. He realized that people wanted to approach him to chat, but they didn't dare, he was always elusive when it came to talking about his feelings. He had the look of a helpless boy with his small brown eyes, the curls protruding from the contour of his fine, light-skinned head. When he wore glasses, he looked even more helpless. But he ruined any initiative of mercy on the part of others with his cutting judgments and his outbursts. When he got angry, he chose to keep his mouth shut and not speak to anyone again all day. But the rest of the time he demonstrated extreme patience.

He reached the third floor and entered the operating room locker room. There were two colleagues who were going to help him.

-Did they bring the patient?

-Yes, Ruiz. They told me what happened, I'm very sorry...-said one.

-If you had told us, we would accompany you for a while at the funeral...-said the other.

He thanked her as he put on the ambo.

"She was a very brave girl," said Cisneros.

Alberto Cisneros, the anesthetist, had helped him with Cecilia's amputation. That time he had advised him not to operate on him, but on someone else. But she had insisted, she did not want another surgeon other than Ruiz. If not, she would not have the operation. He had admitted Cecilia the day before to spend the night in the hospital. It was the usual way to prepare for previous studies, but it was also a relief for Ruiz. He couldn't have stood sleeping in the same bed with the woman he was going to amputate. Everyone in the operating room that morning had looked at him as if they saw someone more than just a man. He saw Cecilia leave her locker room accompanied by two nurses. He turned around before she addressed him. at a glance. He heard her talking to the anesthetist, who asked her to lie down on the stretcher. Then they placed the sterile drapes covering her vision, and then he was able to approach the operating table and look at her leg painted with iodine. That leg that smelled terribly bad

and was like a dead dog slowly decomposing. As if Cecilia had been carrying a corpse attached to her leg for months.

Bernardo returned to reality.

"We're going to operate," he said, and entered the operating room. The patient was still awake.

"He wants to talk to you," Cisneros commented in his ear.

-What's wrong, Vicente?

-Doctor, if something happens to me, tell my brother to take care of the birds.

Ruiz looked at Cisneros, then at the nurses, but no one understood what he meant.

"It must be the effect of the sedative, surely," said Ruiz. It's okay, Vincent. Everything will be fine, don't worry.

Vicente Larriere was a forty-year-old man, and for the last five months the polyps had been growing very rapidly. He closed his eyes, his hands shaking. They put the oxygen mask on him and he fell asleep.

Ruiz washed his hands and returned to the operating room. The nurse and the instrument technician were chatting about things about him, Cisneros was observing the patient's heart rate on the monitor. Ruiz put on the nightgown and sterile gloves, approached the table and asked for the scalpel. He made a transverse incision in the abdomen, on the right side. He extended the cut obliquely towards the center. He asked for gauze, dried the wound, went deeper until he passed through the fatty tissue and reached the peritoneum membrane.

-Wide dividers.

The assistant, an advanced resident, opened the lips of the wound and covered them with gauze. He coagulated the minor blood vessels that Ruiz was cutting. He reached down to the duodenum and put his right hand in to palpate the adhesions. He felt a sting and jerked his hand away.

-Did you cut yourself, doctor?

-I don't know, and also with what, if I only used my hands.

He changed his gloves. He had a small red dot on his index finger. He washed himself with disinfectant and put on new gloves again. He put his hand in again. This time he felt several rock-hard protuberances. He followed the course of the small intestine. There were no polyps there but he was concerned about those lumps.

-There are some very rare tumors. I need scissors.

The instrument worker handed them to him and he began to dissect the omentum membranes. When he freed almost a meter, he lifted the viscera. They shone under the light. He looked at the walls and felt that they were full of those same tumors, adhered to the inside.

-They could be metastases...

He ligated the arteries of the sector he was going to cut, and plunged the scalpel. Then a row of insects sprouted from the wound and spread, covering the rest of the viscera, getting into the inaccessible parts of the open abdomen, spreading over Ruiz's hands and the fabrics that covered the patient. They were black, beetle-like, but he would not have been able to classify them even if he had had time to observe them like an entomologist. And while these thoughts flew dizzyingly through his head, the insects multiplied at a much greater speed, because they did not stop coming out of the wound.

"My God!" Ruiz said, but he couldn't see the faces of his assistant or the anesthetist, and he didn't even look at the nurses, assuming that they had fainted or walked away. He only managed, like a boy, like an ordinary man and not with the experience of a surgeon, to crush the insects as if he were in the garden of his house and a plague had emerged from an anthill flooded with water.

He didn't know what he said next, maybe he asked questions to no one in particular, possibly to the god he named, because we have to call someone when we see what we never supposed could exist, because it wasn't possible for it to exist. A man full of insects was a good question to ask God.

He hit the patient's body trying to crush as many insects as possible, and put gauze covering the wound. His hands were not enough to cover all those who continued to emerge from his body. He saw them fall to the floor and scatter across the ground. He thought he saw that the nurses were trampling on them and that Cisneros was at the door, paralyzed like him. No one was monitoring the patient's heart, and then he felt the monitor's typical sound interrupted by an alarm.

-Cisneros! He's dying, come quickly!

He watched him come back jumping because he didn't seem to dare step on the insects.

But Ruiz didn't know what to do. It was impossible to suture, the insects kept coming out and the entire table was a crackling layer of broken membranes from which those that were still alive emerged. Ruiz felt nauseous. He asked for water to irrigate the body, and he barely managed to clear the wound a little. That's when he saw the spiders . The insects were turning around and their bellies were opening and letting out spiders that moved quickly across the table. The patient's body was completely

covered in spiders, Ruiz's hands and arms covered in beetles. Spiders with long, very thin legs began to swing on webs from the lamp to the floor.

Ruiz heard screams, blows and a roar that he did not know if it had occurred in the hospital or inside his head. Because his conscience collapsed with unclassifiable astonishment and disgust. How to name what he had seen. Human understanding advances in short steps on dark steps, each step a slow and weak illumination. Having reached this stage of his life, Ruiz believed, for a moment, that death is more than hell, and that the destiny of souls was to become spiders.

Then everything went dark. The light in the operating room went out with a bang and the burning smell of a muscle cut with an electric coagulator. His head hurt and he could no longer stand. He felt his arms and began to brush off the spiders.

"Get them off me!" he shouted.

Two people were holding him by the arms. He opened his eyes. Looking at his hands, he saw that they were free of insects, and that he was wearing pajamas, and he was no longer in the operating room. He recognized one of the hospital rooms, but he had always been on the other side, at the foot of the bed, observing the space he now occupied.

-Doctor, do you feel better?

He felt that the insects were still on his skin, he remembered how they had jumped on his face and he had rubbed it in disgust and nausea. He pulled the sheets off the bed and looked, they were immaculately clean, still smelling of starch and disinfectant.

-My God. What happened? The insects... how were they killed?

He looked at each one of those who accompanied him. The ward nurse, gray-haired, obese and middle-aged, looked at him sadly from the door of the room. Cisneros was at the foot of the bed, expressionless, tall and rigid as always. A room assistant watched him without understanding anything. The instrument worker was crying, sitting in a chair next to him, and she was holding his hand.

-He had a shock, doctor. The patient went into cardiac arrest and you lost consciousness. We did analysis, look...

Cisneros handed him a paper with the results.

-You came to work with at least twenty-four hours of fasting. You were hypoglycemic. How can you think? That and the scare over the patient made you collapse, Bernardo.

"The patient died, Dr. Ruiz," she said.

He didn't understand what they were talking about. He assumed it was about what had happened today, but perhaps they were talking about any other day, because no one mentioned the main disaster of that morning.

-But the insects, damn it! The spiders that came out of the beetles, as if they were reservoirs... so many and so many inside the abdomen, my God, I can't believe it...

Ruiz spoke with his eyes fixed on the whiteness of the sheets, creating a theory, imagining a disposition and an evolutionary process of a certain logic. It was attractive to think about, although it still couldn't be explained how they had entered the patient's intestine, how they had developed.

I'm going crazy, Ruiz thought.

"You were delirious all afternoon with insects and spiders," said Cisneros.

Ruiz stood up and grabbed him by the arms. She shook him in a way that was not violent, but desperate.

-But I saw you almost escaping from the operating room, and you didn't dare to step on them...

Cisneros looked at the others with a sad face. Ruiz turned around and looked at each one. The instrument was crying and he took her shoulders and asked:

-Are you also going to tell me that I dreamed all this?

She nodded.

-And where is the patient?

-In the morgue.

-And the family members?

-There is only his brother. We already gave you the news. Tomorrow morning they will come to look for the body.

Ruiz looked at Cisneros with the expression of someone who believes he has discovered another in a mistake.

-But who closed the wound, who cleaned the body? Aren't they going to do an autopsy?

-Your assistant closed the wound after death, the nurses cleaned the body. It is not necessary to do an autopsy, I signed the death certificate due to cardiac arrest. There are three witnesses, including you.

Ruiz covered his face with his hands and sat back down on the bed. Cisneros approached him and put a hand on his shoulder.

-You have to rest. You are stressed by everything that happened these days. We all knew Cecilia, she was an excellent girl. You should take a couple of weeks off.

Bernardo looked up at his friend. He nodded his head in the affirmative. Cisneros was too distinguished, like an English gentleman, the presence of the almost perfect medical image with his impeccable both and the serenity of him. But he had seen him desperate just a few hours ago, although and I wasn't sure. The room was real, the afternoon falling on the parking lot under the bedroom window, the ambulances, the white curtains swaying in the breeze from the window. He felt chills, his pajamas were soaked in sweat.

The nurse brought the thermometer and placed it in her armpit. A minute later he studied the column of mercury.

-Some fever, not much, doctor. You need to eat and rest.

-I have to go home, my father-in-law is alone.

-We already notified you by phone. He comes here to visit him. You can eat in the hospital dining room tonight.

"They thought of everything..." Ruiz said, without intention.

The other three looked at each other without saying a word, then left the room and left him alone.

He had always considered himself a man who could never be able to go to the extremes of hallucination. Mental illness, for him, was not something that could be resolved by excising or medicating an appropriate diet and a drug that would compensate for the action of an altered metabolism, but rather as a weakness of character. He was a doctor, it is true, but that was why he had dedicated himself to a specialty where there were almost no controversies or erroneous interpretations. Tumors must be removed, altered enzymes must be reversed from malfunctioning. But the mind is an area that he did not understand, just as he did not understand the substance of the soul. The only thing he was sure of was that the mind was capable of absolutely anything, even hiding from itself. Flee from the pursuers that she had created, through labyrinths and scenarios invented for that objective, without forgetting to place a blindfold over the eyes of those invented police officers.

Doubt as part of the game called certainty.

And sleep was the greatest environment, a limitless place where man's mind lived longer and more comfortably. The vigil is a prison, as was the room where he now was. Looking out the window at the parked ambulances as the sunset made the shadow fall from the roof of the world. As if the great eyes of the sky were closed, or perhaps the floodgates of the great

factory of the world, where facts destined for a single purpose are permanently built and dismantled: transience, oblivion like the most perfect work of art.

The gears never break, and if they do, there is enough time to modify the structures of the mind and corroborate that there never was such a breakdown, and that if it existed, nothing has survived from it. But the human mind is in a body that is like the trunk of a tree. The scars remain, the blood, like sap, oozes out, and the skin is a crust that heals with roughness and imperfections. That is what the soul or the mind does not want, waste and scars, that is why they insist that the body last as little as possible, but the flesh and bones resist despite the insects and germs. The body supports and is stronger than a god whose substance was formed with the elements of volcanic rock.

That's why Ruiz remembered what had happened this morning not as a hallucination, not even as an illusion, if there was any difference, but with the bitter taste of the insects that had touched his lips and the feeling of their paws running along his arms.

"I have to see the body," he said, and he turned around to see that no one had heard him.

There was only Renato, at the door of the room. He hadn't seen him arrive, and who knows how long he had been there.

-How are you? -He asked her.

-Better.

The old man pulled out a chair and sat down next to the bed. Ruiz lay down after raising the headboard and putting down a couple of pillows.

-They told me you fainted.

-I think so, I don't remember well. Only I went into the operating room and then I woke up here. In the middle I think I dreamed, I guess...

There was no point in explaining to the old man. In addition to worrying him, he would lose what little trust he still had in her. He needed to protect him like a child whose expectations he didn't want to disappoint.

-Tell me, Renato. This morning I wanted to ask you something and I forgot. I had a dream last night, and well...I wanted to know if Cecilia ever had pets.

The old man knitted his eyebrows, looking into space, trying to remember.

-No, I don't remember what we had. He only once got excited about an anthill, the kind that comes between two sheets of glass. She had a cousin,

Leticia, from my wife's family. They spent a summer together on the beach, and her little cousin, who had a hobby of collecting insects, gave her one of those anthills I told you about. You could see the hallways like different floors of an apartment building. Cecilia fed the ants strands of grass and crushed leaves. One day she fell off the nightstand when she woke up and all the ants spread across the floor. For weeks we found ants everywhere. But the first day was a drama, Cecilia cried Because of his loss, my wife and I ran around trying to kill the ants. They were impossible to stop. At night we went to bed, laughing about what had happened, and we kept finding ants between the sheets.

Renato laughed for the first time since the funeral.

-Those were the first and only pets that Cecilia had. But why do you ask me?

-For nothing in particular. I already told you, I had a dream...

From last night, events rushed like in those dreams where waking up is just another part of the dream. A more superficial state in appearance, but perhaps deeper in reality, where each awakening is a greater collapse, a more extensive tearing of the imprecise membranes that separate wakefulness and sleep. Membranes similar to those that surround muscles or those cocoons of worms. He had to see the patient's body and see for himself that what he remembered in detail was nothing more than a sample of the perfect engineering of nightmares.

Cecilia had once told him about her cousin Leticia. It was after her second surgery, when she had part of her foot amputated. She was in the hospital bed, looking up at the ceiling. When Bernardo approached her and took her hand, she pulled her away from him and pointed to the ceiling. At that time they were just starting their relationship. Her parents had not yet gotten used to the idea of seeing them together, so they did not like to show affection to each other in her presence or in front of the hospital staff.

"One summer my cousin took me to the beach," she began to say. She had two glass jars that she had taken from the shelf where she kept her insect collection. In one there was a spider, in the other a lobster. Leticia opened one, grabbed the lobster and put it in the jar with the spider, and closed it. Then the two of us dedicated ourselves to watching how the spider wrapped its legs around the lobster, even though it was three times its size. The lobster, weak as a vegetable, folded and moved towards the lid of the jar. But the spider followed her without haste, first catching her with her legs, and then beginning to attract her. I don't know how it was done, but from that small body came out like two legs with pincers that began to chew the lobster. She moved even though she had lost parts of her body, but in the end she stayed still when the spider ate her head.

Cecilia continued pointing to the ceiling.

"It was a spider like that," she said.

Bernardo looked, there was a cobweb in the corner between the ceiling and the wall. Something was moving but he couldn't make it out, and he didn't care either.

-Everything went well, my love. You have to take care of yourself.

-I know, that's why I have you. But isn't it curious, dear, how alike men and insects are?

-I don't understand you, in what way are they similar?

-Some eat others, to pieces. And it's funny how one can stay alive even without body parts.

This had happened five years earlier. Then she agreed to move into Ruiz's apartment, and for three and a half years, her leg and foot remained unscathed.

She asked the old man if she had had dinner, and invited him to eat together at the hospital buffet. Ruiz put on a robe that Renato had brought, along with the toothbrush and underwear. They went down the stairs and arrived at the dining room. There was only one couple sitting at a table. She told Renato to sit down while he went to buy food for both of them. She looked for a tray and chose from the platters two chicken supremes and two salads. She took two sodas out of the refrigerator and went to the register to pay. As she turned around she collided with someone waiting behind her.

"Sorry," she said. At first she had not recognized the man, but as she returned to the table she realized that he was the brother of her patient. She sat up and looked back, the man was also watching him as he paid for his dinner. She watched him sit near the door.

"What's wrong?" Renato asked.

-He is an acquaintance...

He didn't feel like chatting or explaining. She tried to forget, but she felt the other's gaze on him. Five minutes later she saw him next to her.

-You are Dr. Ruiz, aren't you?

He looked at him and nodded.

-I am Vicente's brother.

-Ah, I remember. I'm am so sorry about what happened. I assume they told you that he suffered a cardiac arrest.

-Yes, but they were the ones who killed him.

-I don't understand.

-They, the ones who live in dark places, under rocks, in pipes, on roofs.

If the man was crazy, it was not this that caught Ruiz's attention, but rather that he was the only one who talked about what no one seemed willing to talk about.

-But that's not why I bother you, doctor. I wanted to know if my brother said something to him...

-I don't remember, but yes... let me think... before going to sleep he recommended that I tell him to take care of the birds. decayed could not obscure an asymmetrical smile on a thin face with prematurely cracked skin. He was tall, with a pronounced abdomen that deformed his lanky figure. The man extended his hand. Ruiz shook it. He immediately recognized the sensation he had suffered that morning upon contact with the insects. Then he quickly moved his hand away but the other didn't seem to notice. He greeted Renato with a “good night” and left the dining room.

They finished eating in silence. He did not respond to a single one of the old man's words.

-Go home and sleep. Tomorrow at noon I'm sure I'll be there," he told her as he said goodbye.

He didn't go to bed. He looked out the window at the parking lot, to the left was the hallway that led to the morgue. He left the room and passed in front of the nursing office.

"I'm going to the guard to talk to some colleagues," he said to the nurse.

She nodded.

There was little movement in the guard. There was no one in the doctors' room. He entered and searched the desk for some keys. He left through the emergency door and walked down the hallway that he had seen through the window. It was one in the morning on a Thursday. It was cool and humid. The dampness of the walls and the smell of garbage surrounded him. He opened the door to the morgue and entered. He turned on the lights. He walked past the sinks and dissecting tables. He stood in front of the cold room where the corpses were. There were three three-story columns. All of them lacked signs or indications on the doors. He tried the first one, it was empty. The second on the right, there was nothing either. The third the same.

He started with the second row. There was his patient. The purple skin with traces of dried blood on his face. He saw the seams his assistant had

made on the abdomen. There were no traces of insects on the surface of his skin. He went to look for a scissors in the instrument cabinet and returned to the body. He cut the seams, and the only thing that came out was a fly. A large, green fly that had survived the low temperature of the refrigerator, even though it was almost impossible for it to do so. But he had resisted the cold by hiding in the warmth that still emanated from the man's insides. He also saw some very small ants on the stretcher, hovering in the secretions that had leaked onto the stretcher.

However, none of this was strange in a place like that. Life makes its way in the most senseless way possible in the most inappropriate places. None of this served to confirm that what happened that morning had been more than a nightmare. Only the words of Vicente's brother, and it is already known that words are susceptible to multiple interpretations, especially if they come from a man affected by the death of such a close relative.

When he left the morgue he saw a shadow sneaking out of the hallway. She was tall, and he thought he also saw that she had a prominent abdomen. He ran there and saw him crouching in a corner next to the waste bags. The shadow didn't move, but he knew who it was. He heard a very soft cry, then he noticed that he raised one arm and rested it on the wall, as if he were going to get up. Then Ruiz walked away to leave him alone. But he realized, just a second after walking away, that his hand had caught something against the wall. A dirty wall in a corner full of garbage, where only rats and flies live comfortably.

That night he finally lay down in his hospital bed, under the yellowish light and listening to the constant drip of a bathroom faucet. He turned on his side and spent a while with his eyes open, looking at the floor on that side of the bed. Then he fell asleep, or thought he slept, because what he had begun to imagine while awake continued in the dream. He was walking through the field towards the same tree as last time. The bus was moving away, not interested in the two dead people left behind. Ruiz first approached the dog, almost crushed and with the disassembled bones floating as if inside a leather bag. He wanted to be methodical and not waste too much energy, that's why he had planned to bury them both at the same time. He lifted the dog by its paws and carried it to the old man's corpse. He lay face down, licking the evening dew on the grass. Ruiz pulled a rope out of his pocket, he didn't know why he carried it on him, but he didn't think much about it. He tied the dog's legs to the old man's feet, then tied his hands, leaving a long rope that he tied around his waist. When he was ready, he started walking dragging the two corpses from the road to the house. It was an uphill path, now that he was carrying weight he just realized. He bent over a little for strength, glancing from time to time at his burden. There was a clean trail behind the dog, a new trail marked for others, perhaps.

He arrived at the patio of the house. He passed the wooden fence and barbed wire. Stop I went and looked around. She found a shovel leaning against the wall. She untied herself and started digging right there where she had stopped. It was getting dark, but I didn't need light. Digging a well can be done by anyone who has arms and a tool, even a blind person only needs to feel the level of the ground to know when to stop. The sun was hiding behind the tree, and the smoke from the bus formed a dense column in front of the weak sun. On the other side, the pale moon loomed over the house.

He dug and dug for what seemed like more than half an hour. He went into the well and checked the depth, it reached up to his neck. It was more than enough. He looked for the shadow of the old man's body and found the free end of the rope. He pulled hard and managed to drag him to the edge and make him fall. The dog followed him, always tied to the feet of the person who had owned him.

He barely saw where to throw the earth when he began to return it to its place. He left a raised mound, and after two or three blows, he left the shovel in the disturbed earth. He turned towards the house. He didn't see absolutely anything. I must have gone blind, he told himself. But soon he could see a line of light on the horizon, very thin, and the stars that were just being born. Then the moon came out from behind a cloud and illuminated him, seeing himself now standing on his back next to the grave. He looked up at the moon and backed away, falling backwards as he tripped over something. He searched for the object on the dark earth. He found something covered in hair, picked it up and exposed it to the cold moonlight.

It was the dog's head. He must have been almost decapitated by the accident, and he had not noticed it. His head had resisted all the way, until just before falling into the well it broke off. He looked at her carefully. His eyelids were closed, his ears had lost their rigidity, his mouth showed his fangs outside of it, and his tongue stuck out. It was still hot. He grabbed the head and carried it under his right armpit towards the house. He hoped there was water inside to wash her, something to cover her so she wouldn't be cold.

A part of the body is the body itself, he thought. A being divided into two is not two, but always half of one.

And his voice was confused with the buzz of the mosquitoes that began to surround the house, messengers of the icy certainty of blood.

He opened his eyes and the first thing he saw was his right hand on the pillow. Palm facing up like a woman lying on her back showing her belly and sex. Her fingers flexed and seemingly relaxed. But he realized that was not the case, they were tense and the shape they took was as if they were holding something back. Something shaped like a dog skull.

Bernardo remembered that Cecilia had shown him an animal head the day she moved in with him. Cecilia rang the bell like any other visitor and entered her life with a suitcase in each hand, swaying with the characteristic sway of her walk, for which he was responsible. Not of the disease, because this is only a manifestation, a set of facts inaccessible to the logic of guilt.

Man, however, has an indivisible soul, a substance that cannot be analyzed because nothing makes it up and everything in turn is part of it. Not fragments, but an entire, stony, indestructible unit that with all the weight of the possible and the impossible acts on even the smallest grain of salt. He can destroy it or he can fertilize it. Capable of the probable as well as capable of the improbable. Fertilizing a stone is a job that concerns you. That is why the soul, so fertile and powerful, resembles a boastful and at the same time naive child. He acts without realizing it, and sometimes kills without intention. But is the soul a bone grown from naivety or a tumor fed by evil?

Ruiz had operated on her a second time and she then decided to move in with him. In love or grateful, perhaps both at the same time, along with a third possibility balancing on them: resentment.

Cecilia unpacked the suitcases, filled the empty shelves and one side of the closet. She did not invade him, she simply occupied the spaces he had designated for her. She then undressed and entered the bathtub. He watched her dip into the warm water, lift her legs up and place them over the edge of hers.

They hurt me, she told him. He approached her to massage her and felt the scar on her stump.

Does it still hurt, she asked him. She shook her head. Insensitivity, he thought, neuropathy from diabetes. But the insensitivity was also in Ruiz's hands and mind, that was what she was saying now with her eyes. I move in with you and you don't even kiss me. And what excuses did he have, perhaps his own brain was also a putrid mass of decomposed nerves, incapable of feeling pity or love. Those two extremes of the human condition.

So I almost despaired Then, Bernardo began to undress, and without doing it completely, he got into the bathtub and started kissing her. Saying forgive me, while he did it.

That afternoon she unwrapped the dog skull that her cousin had given her when they were girls. They had found her on the beach, they studied her together, and when they said goodbye to her upon returning to the city, her cousin left him that set of her bones as a gift. Cecilia stretched out her arms holding the skull in her hands, so that Bernardo could see it better, but that first day she did not allow him to touch it. He put it on the TV and then seemed to forget about it. He occasionally moved her when cleaning, but without even looking at her. Other times he had noticed, however, how she took her eyes off the screen and her gaze was lost in the bony surface of the skull. She could stay like that for an hour without saying anything, just touching her sick leg to scratch, because she felt like hundreds of ants were walking around inside her bones.

Ruiz now got up from the hospital bed and closed the curtains. It was ten in the morning. The nurse must have stopped by several times, but no one bothered to wake him up. He had two weeks off, according to what he had been told. He wasn't even sure if the previous day had actually happened as much as he remembered. The day he looked splendid through the window, and while he showered and shaved he prayed to the image of him in the bathroom mirror that everything had been a figment of his imagination. He knew that the mind is as fertile as God in creating inventions, and that even that same mind was capable of having created the God who in turn had created it. All of that, the existence of the creator and the connotations around it, was not something he had to worry about now. His concern focused exclusively on leaving that hotel room for the sick, having breakfast and then verifying that his patient's body was still a corpse with the characteristics of any other, that is, immobility and silence, because only death reconciles both virtues in their absolute meaning.

He brushed his teeth, rubbed lotion over his freshly shaved face, dressed slowly, and looked in the mirror once more. Everything was ready. The clock showed eleven in the morning. He went down to the hospital dining room and everyone greeted him as if he had arrived from his own home.

"Are you feeling okay, doctor?" the ward nurse asked as they both sat down to have coffee.

-Much better, thank you.

-Eat some croissants, doctor. He is haggard, he seems thinner than yesterday.

He accepted. Several passed by his table to greet him. The instrument technician who had assisted him the day before stared at him while she spoke to him. She said one thing with her mouth, another with her eyes. He didn't want to ask anything. Cisneros rushed to the operating room and greeted him from afar. Ruiz looked at the ceiling of the dining room, towards

the kitchen side he saw two cockroaches slowly parading towards the center of the ceiling. He looked down, just below there were two people sitting, dressed in black, a man of approximately sixty years old, with a beard and thick eyebrows, who seemed not to feel comfortable with the suit he was wearing. The other was a young woman, perhaps her daughter, dressed in a black blouse and a pair of gray pants; Her fingers played with a cheap gold metal necklace, while she looked towards where Ruiz was.

The insects had remained still, and Bernardo had the curious sensation, if he had to define it to himself with the least atrocious term possible, that they looked like projected shadows. It was not possible for him to have them in that environment illuminated by phosphorescent lights on all four sides and in the middle of the morning. Neither he nor he could tell if the insects were shadows of the people or the people were shadows of the insects. But looking up was like seeing something as humanly common as another member of the bodies that were sitting down there, still and almost without moving. And looking at the woman was like looking at two green flies that had usurped the place of her eyes. They were beautiful, however, and did not contrast with the white complexion and brown hair. Then the clock on the wall struck twelve noon and they got up and headed towards the exit. The cockroaches were gone.

When he passed the back door of the hospital, the brightness of the patio blinded him for a moment. The white lime walls, the white metal of the ambulances making the reflection of the sun flash, which was not yellow but white, filtering with difficulty through a soft winter fog. Darkness is sometimes more peaceful than light, more merciful too, because it allows hope even within the unknown; On the other hand, extreme luminosity reduces everything to a crude, painful and hopeless blindness. There is no redemption or peace between the vertical borders of a light that covers everything and melts it into an inert, sterile whiteness. Eternal life, yes. Immoved ity and silence constitute eternal life.

Bernardo saw how the coffin was taken out of the morgue, and stepped back to make way for the procession. Four elderly women accompanied the coffin bearers. They left the yard toward the street and put the box in a hearse. The old women got into the next car. Vicente's brother, the girl from the dining room and the old man went up to the third. The woman must have been the patient's wife or partner, he didn't know for sure. The man, his father or perhaps his father-in-law. He didn't dare ask the brother when he passed by him, brushing his elbow and not realizing who he was. Because the strange light of that midday gave the sensation of being on the white screen of a jammed television, and the figures of the old women looked like black dots, flies walking on the glass of the screen.

When Ruiz's eyes adjusted to the light, he looked for his car parked on that same block and continued the procession. He did not know where Larriere would be buried, but there was nothing else he had to do that day, so he followed them for many blocks, and the blocks turned into kilometers

until he left the city and took the route towards La Plata. Maybe they would take him to the cemetery in his hometown, he thought as he drove, protected from the winter cold by the car's heater. Even so, a cool breeze filtered through, so he put on his gloves, first one and then the other, without letting go of the steering wheel. A bee appeared on the inside of the windshield. Ruiz followed the flight of the insect with his gaze. The buzzing began to bother him. He decided to crush it, carefully and surely so that it wouldn't sting him. The bee landed on the board for less than a second and he crushed it with his right hand. The remains stuck to the glove.

He looked in the rearview mirror and saw that he was the last one in the caravan. Only four cars made up it, traveling at no more than forty kilometers per hour. They passed the limits of La Plata. They continued for almost four more hours, when they reached the bridge over the Samborombón River they continued another few kilometers and turned off to take a dirt road to the right. It was the beginning of a very small town. The sign on the side of the road announced: “Le coeur antique.” There were apparently abandoned and half-ruined buildings on the sides of the road. Low buildings with arches and high gabled roofs. The hearse raised clouds of dust that enveloped those behind, giving a glimpse from time to time of the dogs coming out of the old sheep sheds and some children watching the short caravan pass by.

They arrived at the center of the town, or what must have been the center judging by what they could see: a small square without trees, some splintered wooden seats, a bust placed on a cement pedestal, and a rusty mast without any flag. On the other side, a warehouse with adobe bricks whose door faced the corner, two old women were talking surrounded by a swarm of black flies. To the left, a hardware and fodder store, with two narrow windows on the sides of the rickety door, and on whose threshold there were two empty chairs with straw seats and cushions. A dog was barking sitting on the sidewalk, without even getting up, with a hoarse, tired and old bark. To the right was a bakery, with glass windows where the merchandise seemed to have been displayed for more than forty years. Cans of sardines, sausages and cold cuts, and at the bottom the bread that should no longer have the smell of bread, because a musty aroma invaded the entire place.

They parked for a few minutes next to another square place, with dark pink whitewashed walls, a tall double-leaf door and a lamp swinging in the breeze, still lit as if to mark the passage between the clouds of dust that were slowly settling or spreading with the slightest light. mid-afternoon breeze. It was a stationery store, it seemed, but there were also bolts of fabric, shelves of stacked books, a few empty wine bottles, and old tailor's irons.

One of the old women got out of the car and went in there. Ten minutes later she came out again, and during that time the cars waited with their engines running. When she got out, she signaled to the other cars and the

drivers turned off their engines. Ruiz imitated them. The doors opened and the occupants got out. The four bearers lowered the coffin and carried it on their shoulders towards the plaza. The old women followed them, walking slowly, with their hands clasped over their chests as if in prayer, but something told Ruiz that it wasn't exactly a prayer. The low-heeled shoes almost slid over the dirt and pebbles. The dead man's family began to walk behind, the woman in the middle of the men, holding each man's arm. Vicente's brother looked at Ruiz as he got out of the car. He smiled kindly at her and continued on his way. Bernardo was going to follow them, but or felt like urinating, and realized he couldn't last much longer. He decided to ask permission in that kind of bazaar, so he went in and clapped his hands because there was no one in sight. The interior was poorly lit by openings at the top of the walls, which lacked plaster. They were also covered with shelves with innumerable objects, tools, old fabrics, cogwheels, sheets of paper, tires, rims, and many other things that he did not have time to distinguish, because suddenly a short man appeared, bald man and a thick beard, with a book in his hands. Without speaking, he questioned him with his eyes.

"Excuse me," Ruiz said. May I use the bathroom?

The man pointed to a hallway at the back. Ruiz thanked him and went there. The same smell and a denser gloom inhabited the hallway. The floor was dirt. He passed by the door of a kitchen, which he looked at from the side, it was wide and very old, with a large table in the middle, four chairs around it and a round black metal oven like the shell of a huge dead beetle. . The next door was the bathroom. The same age in the facilities. a large white porcelain sink marked with green stripes where water had stagnated over the years, a mirror with rust stains, a white toilet without a lid and a long chain hanging from the tank. He urinated for three minutes in the dim light hanging from the ceiling. When he finished, he felt his feet tingle. I haven't pissed myself, I guess, he said to himself. It was a hot, tingling sensation that soon caused him to burn. He zipped up his pants and looked at his shoes. They were covered in ants. He started shaking his feet, and he had the bad idea to take off his shoes. That way he had to lean on the floor full of ants. The fucking mother who gave birth to him said several times while he jumped, not wanting to make a lot of noise because she was embarrassed that the owner of the place would come and see him jumping like a faggot. He turned on the sink faucet and lifted one foot at a time to put it under the water. Thus, little by little, he was able to free himself from the ants. He put his shoes back on and left the bathroom. In the hallway he met the man.

-All good sir?

"Yes, a problem with some ants," he said, inadvertently scratching one calf after the other.

-Yes, you will know how to excuse me, but it is a common problem in this town.

Ruiz looked towards the street door and thought that the procession must have already gone out of sight.

-Could you tell me how to get to the cemetery?

-To the cemetery? Follow the path to the square and then the dirt road, there is no other and you will not get confused.

Ruiz greeted and went out into the street. He got into the car and started down the indicated road. After the square there was an open field with bushes and bushes, between which the path opened that was barely the width of a car. He soon met the procession, which was on foot with the same pace at which he had seen them leave. There was no room to pass, if he left the car there it would interrupt the road, and although he was not sure if anyone else was going to pass by there, he decided to follow them at slow speed. But after fifteen minutes they had made little progress and the engine was beginning to overheat. He stopped, opened the hood and poured water into the cooling tank. Meanwhile, the procession continued to advance slowly through the bushes and under the afternoon sun. He went back up, turned on the radio and tried to tune in to the news, but there was interference that made it impossible to hear anything clearly. He changed the dial until he found the only station free of intermittence. They were playing an opera, and then he thought of Renato. He had to have told her where he was going, or at least that he would be gone for a while. He would later call him from a pay phone. He tried to identify the music, and recognized the aria from Verdi's Macbeth where Banquo and his son are ambushed in the forest. The deep beauty of the bass voice reverberated in the narrow space of the car, and coming out of the windows, it seemed to bounce between the bushes to return to his ears with another tone, double, but not like an echo, but like another voice of the same singer, this time darker and sadder. As if the bass sang with someone else who was him, too, but much further ahead, already dead. Then Ruiz had the strange idea that the voice was coming from the procession, making its way through the silence that seemed to want to dominate the path to the cemetery.

He started the engine and drove up to just behind the family members. They didn't even turn to look at him. This indifference bothered him a little, because after all he was the only one, besides the family, who had attended the funeral. He supposed that that shouldn't matter much to them, it was evident that that strange procession, those old women who must have organized the whole funeral ral, and that peculiar place to bury him, was already enough evidence that these were not ordinary people. And he had almost forgotten what he had experienced yesterday in the operating room, as if instead of a day months or years had passed.

The procession stopped in a clearing in the road. There was not a single tree, only bushes of all kinds and full of flowers of multiple colors, leaves of different shapes, short or tall, some of narrow diameter and others of several meters, all extending along the cemetery. The headstones were among the bushes, sticking out like small markers on an abandoned road. The same landscape extended far beyond what Ruiz could see. They didn't form an even green, but it did look like a sea of frozen waves. Later, after the funeral, Ruiz would discover that as the sun went down and darkness began to descend from the sky, the sea of bushes took on a grayish tone from which the tombstones stood out, not like tombs, but like indicator stones. .

But it was still half past five in the afternoon, and the procession entered the plants. Ruiz left the car and followed them. He was reading the inscription on the tombstones, and he could only distinguish dates and names that meant nothing at all to him. There were no portraits or religious signs, there were no offerings or any sign of personal belongings. No one seemed to visit the dead, yet the place appeared carefully maintained. The bushes had no artificial pruning, but had grown with a curious harmony in their arrangement. Suddenly, Ruiz tripped over something. He looked back and saw a severed tree trunk. As he continued, he noticed that there were many more hidden in the bushes. All the trees had been cut down, even the plaza was devoid of them. Then he realized that without trees there couldn't be birds either, and he noticed the silence of all trills since he had arrived; he had not seen a single bird in all that time.

“Be careful of the birds,” Vicente had instructed him to tell his brother. Because birds live in trees, and eat, among other things, insects. Where there are no birds, insects can live. But Ruiz had not seen anything strange, nor could he call the episode of the ants in the bathroom that. In a country place it is common for there to be insects.

The box had been deposited on the side of the already opened grave. There were no diggers or shovels in sight. The disturbed earth was dry and cracked on one side so it must have been prepared days before, perhaps. But Vicente had only died twenty-four hours earlier. The old women stopped next to the coffin, and one after another, they kicked the wood. There were eight hits of her gray shoes with low heels and rounded toes, old women's shoes, as innocent as could be expected from their owners. Ruiz didn't know whether to laugh or be outraged at that ceremony. No one would say farewell words, nor would a priest speak about life beyond death or remember the repeated dust we are and to dust we will return. Why break the eloquence of silence or ignore the evident supremacy of the earth. That was fine, in a way, but... kick the coffin? As if they had intended to wake the dead. And then Bernardo realized that those kicks had no other objective than to make the insects that were inside come out. Beetles of the same kind that he had seen in the operating room began to emerge from the slots between the lid and the rest of the coffin. The insects poured out by the

hundreds, and for ten minutes they continued coming out, descending to the floor, and descending into the pit.

Ruiz's hands were shaking, a cold sweat was falling down his face. He thought he was going to faint, but then he understood the logic of what he saw, that inverted logic. The insects must go to the dead body to eat it, that is normal. This time, however, they had been in the living body, eating it, and now they were leaving it.

The bearers passed two ropes under the coffin, and placing two on each side, they lifted it over the grave and lowered it. A swarm of flies rose at that moment from all the bushes. Ruiz covered his head with his coat, looking around for a place to take refuge, but obviously there was none. The others did not move, allowing themselves to be enveloped by the flies that produced the most horrible buzzing sound he had ever heard. The light had diminished, because the swarm seemed to also cover the sky, but when he looked up he saw that they were not flies, but an immense plague of locusts that came from the wide river and lagoon of Samborombón. They passed over them, hitting the bodies of the men and women next to the grave. When the locusts disappeared and only a few stragglers passed by, Ruiz gazed at the cloudy sky.

Insects fled from a storm ta. The rain began to fall in thick drops that hit the earth next to the grave. Then the rain became thinner but constant. Ruiz ran to the car and closed the windows. Dead flies and lobsters were left on the upholstery, but there was nothing he could do but hold on. He put on the windshield wipers and watched the way the water softened the dry earth and fulfilled the role the diggers should have played. The earth now softened by the water began to fall into the pit, first slowly, then like an avalanche that covered the box permanently.

The old women, the porters and the family turned around and walked back towards the town. They passed by the car. Vicente's brother said something that he didn't understand over the sound of the rain. The woman looked at him for a moment, and Bernardo thought he saw that she gave him a smile. But perhaps it was the way the water, running down the outside of the glass, warped the faces.

He waited for the rain to let up a little before heading back to town. He hoped to arrive before the road became so muddy that it would be impossible for him to pass without getting stuck. Although it was too late to prevent that, he still couldn't stay in the cemetery. It was curious that the guy at the bazaar had corrected him when he said cemetery. Camposanto was a word related to the religious and the Christian more specifically. There were no religious signs in that cemetery, and now that he thought about it better, he had not seen any churches in the town.

He had to find accommodation to spend the night, he had no intention of taking the route with that rain and it was almost night. But just as he had

not seen a temple, neither had he seen a hotel. He arrived at the square. The hearses were pulling out onto the road. If they dare... he said to himself. But he hadn't eaten anything since breakfast, he was hungry, tired and his clothes were soaked. He got out of the car and went to the bazaar. It had stopped raining and the air had an almost greenish hue, as if the ambient humidity was taking on color. The man was at the door, with his pipe in his lips, sitting with an open book on his thighs. Now that he saw him in more light and sitting up, he noticed his prominent abdomen, contrasting so much with his skinny figure and short stature. The man smiled at him as he watched him approach.

-What a downpour it caught them!

-It seemed like a flood to me.

-It's true.

They remained silent for a minute, not knowing how to continue, or rather it was Ruiz who felt self-conscious in that place.

-Isn't there a hotel around here? I'm hungry and I want to dry my clothes. I think I'll have to spend the night in town.

The man laughed.

-A hotel? We never had anything like it.

-Or an inn, a room in a family home, it could be. I wouldn't want to spend the night in the car. Insects got in and it smells horrible.

It then occurred to him that he could ask Larriere's family, but he did not feel it was appropriate to disturb them on their day of mourning, and even less so for the one who had been a party to Vicente's death. And the man said to him, as if he had read his thoughts:

-Why don't you ask the Larriere, they have a big house five kilometers from here.

He pointed, with his pipe, towards the path that passed by the warehouse. Ruiz had only to accept that alternative.

-Well, I thank you for the advice. I'm going to bother you with another concern. Why does the town have such a strange name?

-Le coeur antique? It would take a lot to explain, but I'll summarize it for you. The founders of the town arrived from France more than one hundred and fifty years ago, the Larriere, it is understood, and they baptized the town with the name of their native village there in Europe.

-I would not have imagined that this town had been in existence for so long.

-It is one of the first founded in the province. We had our good times, what remains are remains, sir, skeletons more like.

Ruiz wanted to give his name and ask the other's, but a sneeze interrupted him.

-He's going to catch a cold. Go with the Larriere, they will receive you well. They are not resentful at all.

Ruiz looked at him with surprise.

-Because it says?

-Because you are the doctor who couldn't save Vicente, right?

Ruiz would have wanted to ask how he had found out, but the old woman who got out of the car when they arrived had probably told him. What bothered him was that it wasn't really a question, but a statement that also carried the truth. And this only admits silence and that immense set of contradictory feelings that follows it closely, that tangle of threads, lint and dead insects that inhabit the old abandoned attics.

He left without saying goodbye. He felt sick, confused and moody enough to respect the good manners he had learned. Who did I owe respect to in that town that started? to disappear in the darkness of the night, because there were not even public lighting in the streets. He was also afraid of disappearing, which is why he would have left if he had had the courage to face the road and the rain even with the fever that was already harassing him.

He followed the path that the man had indicated, passing by the warehouse, where a rusty sheet metal sign said Larriere y Cia. He turned on his headlights to guide himself on that dark road until he found a house that he had never seen, but that he had to recognize because It was the only one according to the type in the bazaar. He read the odometer, it had been five and still nothing. The entire area was in total darkness, the drizzle had resumed and the lights only illuminated bushes on the sides. Then, still quite far away, he saw a light on the road, which grew larger as he went. The path made a hill, and behind it was the Larriere house. When he was very close he saw that it was a fairly large room. With no demarcation limits on the land surrounding the house, he drove the car to the entrance and honked the horn. Some lights came on in addition to those illuminating the windows. A man, who he then recognized as Vicente's brother, went to the car.

-Doctor Ruiz, we thought he was gone! Come on, go inside the house to dry off.

Bernardo got out of the car and let himself be guided to the front door. The hall was lit by a yellow lamp, with a mahogany wood coat rack and umbrella stand. He wiped his soles on a patterned doormat.

The two people he already knew went to meet him from the living room.

-Doctor, this is my sister Natalia, and this is my father, Gustave Larriere.

She smiled at him, and she barely moved her lips in a greeting that he didn't understand. The old man said, with an unmistakable French accent:

-I'm sorry for the rain and the inconvenience, doctor. You have been the only friend who has bothered to accompany my son in his last steps.

-But please, take off that dirty, wet coat. Natalia, I brought clothes from my room. Doctor, I'll accompany you to the bathroom to change. While my father prepares him a hot drink, what does he prefer?

-Honestly, I haven't eaten anything all day.

The other struck his forehead with an excessive gesture.

-But doctor, call me Norberto. Old man, warm up the vegetable soup we had today and a couple of raw ham and goat cheese sandwiches.

Norberto accompanied him to the bathroom. Ruiz took off his clothes and dried himself with a towel, still warm from having been next to the stove. They knocked on the door, Norberto opened it a crack and Natalia's hands reached for her clothes.

-I hope it goes well for you, doctor, excuse the colors, but I am no less than a classic when I dress.

They were a well-made black shirt and pants. He also handed him a pair of underwear and a pair of stockings. Ruiz began to get dressed and felt that he should break the awkward silence.

-Curious ceremony at the cemetery...

The other looked at him with furrowed eyebrows, as if he had gotten angry. He soon smiled as he asked:

-Haven't you been talking to old Hernán Aranguren, by chance?

-If that's the name of the man from the bazaar, yes. Because?

-I already imagined it, he calls it a cemetery to contradict us. Old family feuds, he already knows.

He said no more on the subject.

-Let's go to the table, doctor.

Ruiz took another minute to wash her face and comb her hair. Through the mirror he glanced at Norberto, who appeared to be looking at the floor, or perhaps at his bulging abdomen under the buttoned cashmere.

The four of them sat at the table, he with his bowl of soup, the plate with sandwiches, a glass, a bottle of fine wine and freshly heated bread in the oven. The others had a cup of coffee accompanied by a glass of sherry.

"Thank you again for coming, doctor," said the old man.

Now that he was shaved, the man looked younger, but he must have been in his seventies.

"My dad arrived from France many years ago, but he hasn't lost his accent," said Norberto. I don't know a word, but my brothers do. Natalia and Vicente had plans to travel next year, and I think that precipitated their ruin.

Ruiz did not understand the relationship.

-I do not understand sorry.

-It doesn't matter, doctor. "I lost my tongue," he said, looking at his sister and his father as if apologizing.

The dining room was spacious, carpeted from wall to wall, with a fireplace whose logs crackled and gave off an unmistakable smell of cedar.

-And what is his livelihood? -He asked.

-Campos, doctor-Norberto responded.-We also have the businesses around the square, except, of course, the Aranguren bazaar.

Ruiz felt an itch in his right ear and had no choice but to scratch it. The remains of a fly remained on the tip of his finger.

They laughed.

-Disadvantages of living in the country, doctor. No We have been its victims all our lives. It can be said that we live and die by its effects.

They all smiled, bitterly. Their faces were pathetic in the senselessness they expressed, in the melancholy and despair that shone in their eyes with the light of the home reflected in them. They looked like innocent fireflies exposed to the danger of a large spider hanging from the ceiling. Above the lamp, the ceiling was hidden in darkness, the wooden beams could not be seen at all, and from there came a humming noise that Ruiz could not identify.

Yawning.

-I would appreciate it if you would lend me accommodation for tonight...

The three reacted as if they had insulted his honor.

-You stay the night in Vicente's room. I'm sorry we don't have another one free.

Without giving him time to react, Norberto grabbed him gently by the elbow and led him to the room.

-Anything you need, knock on the next door, I sleep there. You know where the bathroom is. Good night, doctor.

The old man and his sister also came to say goodbye. He shook hands with each one. Her skin was soft, but the old man's seemed to be dry like a fibrous membrane. It was the same feeling he had had when receiving Vicente in his office the last time before the operation.

-May I use the phone? I have to tell my father-in-law, he must be very worried.

The old man pointed to the device on a small cedar table with molded legs and a woven linen tablecloth.

-Hello Renato... Forgive me for not telling you, but I left the hospital in a hurry and... well, I'm a town near Chascomús... I don't know when I'll be back, I guess tomorrow. Don't worry.

He was listening to music in the earpiece. He recognized Verdi's music and Macbeth from him.

-Are you listening to the radio?... No? When did you put the album on? This afternoon?

He hung up the tube and returned thoughtfully to his room. He undressed and got under the sheets. The smell of the humid field was beautiful and shocking at the same time. It was like letting yourself fall asleep on a mattress of grass, but unprotected. He had been so tense in the city, so sure that the continuous state of alertness would defend him from everything, that if he relaxed now and let himself be rocked by the sound of the rain on the bushes perhaps he would never wake up again. . Because sleeping is dying, it is surrendering in the face of daily death on whose pity we depend as submissive and cowardly sinners.

At twelve thirty at night, the chirping of cicadas woke him up to the limit between wakefulness and light sleep, or perhaps, who could deny it with absolute certainty, between deep sleep and true death.

And he dreamed that he was driving down the dirt road towards the side door of the house, with the dog's skull held in his hands and his shoes were muddy. It was dark inside because the old man had left before night fell. He groped on the walls for the light knob. Turning on the ceiling light, he saw a spider web of shadow enveloping the dining room. He looked at the ceiling,

where instead of a hanging lamp there was a metal and frosted glass chandelier. In the living room there was a black table with four legs, thick as thighs that tapered like ankles towards the ends, and covered with a white linen tablecloth. The chairs had high backs and legs with the same shape as the table. A cupboard of shelves was built into the back wall, containing china with images of shepherdesses herding sheep by a lake in French Brittany. On the left, a wall with a portrait of four women on a cart, under a leaden sky. Under the painting, an unlit television with two antennas raised and arranged in a “v” shape.

Ruiz walked to the television, placed the skull on it and turned it on. The image was pure intermittency and the sound was zero. The glass of the screen was covered with fly feces. He went to the kitchen, narrow and long, with the counter, the sink, the oven and the refrigerator arranged in a row against one of the walls. He looked for a cloth, wet it under the tap water and returned to the dining room. He cleaned the TV screen and returned the cloth to the kitchen. While he was away, the pool had filled with ants. He opened the tap again so that the water would wash them away. He returned to the dining room, tuned to the only channel he was broadcasting at that time. It was a home program. A middle-aged woman began to prepare the food. She had short, neatly combed curly hair, and a short-sleeved dress with a white apron. Ruiz sat in a chair. The woman, instead of showing the ingredients and kitchen utensils, began arranging bones on a counter.

-Today we are going to learn, my dear viewers, how to assemble a skeleton.

Ruiz felt excited, as if he suddenly remembered what he had come for, after all those postponements that They had represented the dog's accident, the old man's death and his subsequent burial. Then she got up to go to the next room, where there was a double bed with a bare mattress, which smelled of formaldehyde, a nightstand with the same legs as the rest of the furniture, and a black chest of drawers. She looked in the drawers, full of men's underwear, yellowed papers, bags with items that she couldn't look at because the woman on television wasn't going to wait for her for long. Finally, he found a blank piece of paper and a pencil.

Back in the dining room, he sat down and rested the paper on his right thigh, ready to take notes.

-Now that you are provided with paper and pencil -said the woman- we will begin.

Then she began to explain how to first sketch the body. First, a large, life-sized piece of paper was needed. Then we would draw the sketch of the figure on it. The next step was to make a catalog of the necessary bones, and if he already had all of them, he would have to stock up on a lot of wire and glue. A good supply of screws was also necessary, as were their corresponding screwdriver, wire cutting pliers and needle-nose pliers.

The woman showed all these items on the counter. She then, from a box, took out the long, thin arches of twenty-four ribs, setting them aside. She then took out from another box, one by one, as if lifting between her fingers the weak fiber of a newborn tissue, the bodies of the vertebrae. Some were wide and strong, others small and thin, with lateral and posterior spines or without them, but all with a hole like an air well, like an elevator where fluids go up and down, but in charge of transporting other beings larger than the usual elements of blood. From each of the vertebrae, from its bone structure excavated with passages and irregular wells, ants began to emerge.

Then the woman began to recite a poem. Something that Ruiz knew by heart and that now, when he needed it, he did not remember precisely. Because memory is like an apartment building, many are closed, but that doesn't mean they stop occupying a space that fills with dust and spiders, until one day someone opens the door again.

4

Waking up in a dead man's room is like having shared a bed with that man, having used the same sheets and shared the blankets under which sweat and breathing, even odors and secretions, have been mixed by the. contact while sleeping. Waking up with each other's mouths next to our faces and the breath of the night surrounding the bed.

If one is a man, the same as the dead, it is like a communion with oneself. Looking in the mirror at a sheet worn by the friction of our skin over the years. It is looking at the skin that we will have in that bed or in any other, but always in the same position, because we always have to die in a horizontal position. The body is not a column, it is not even wood, it is flesh that without vital electricity is not able to remain upright. Hence our weakness, the sadness of the poor because they are weak and old. Every human body is old, even if it is a newborn, because every body carries with it the burden of all the dead since the beginning of the world. Each one places their bags and bundles on top of the baby who was born ten seconds ago, and whose cry is not of joy, but of surprise, of bitter surprise that turns into acute despair, and then, a long time later, in that word so hackneyed and dirty by the precocious hands of pretended saints: the word resignation accompanied by the sign of the cross. The cross and surrender, the submissive custom of pacifists, those who turn the other cheek to the unhealthy wind of nostalgia and melancholy. These elements of the cowards, who survive, who persist, who defeat, perhaps, for a time, the tremendous attacks of the infamous children of atrocity and destruction. They are more fearsome than death, because death is finally an end, an

instrument of well-being, a vehicle adequately conditioned for the unnameable state in which the soul will one day, at the end of time, enter a space where the The number zero will have more value than all the other numbers added, multiplied and consumed by the voracious mouth of God.

If waking up in a dead person's bed has these consequences for your thoughts, Ruiz did not stop experiencing them. Therefore, in front of the bathroom mirror he washed and scrubbed his face until he got rid of the marks and grooves that sleep adds night after night on the less and less elastic skin of the living, more and more pitiful and stony as the of the beetles.

He came down to breakfast. He met the two men in the dining room.

"Good morning, doctor," said the old man, standing up effusively. e from the table to shake his hand.

Ruiz thought for a moment that the old man was not sad enough as might be expected from someone who had lost his son only a day and a half before. What's more, he had not seen any of the three cry. But each family has its character, its ways and its internal duels.

Norberto Larriere greeted him while he dried his lips with the napkin, then served him a cup of coffee with milk, offered him honey, sugar and fruit juice. All the table service was impeccably placed, as if there were service people, but there was no one else. The girl had not come down to breakfast yet, his brother said.

-She never gets up before nine.

They both smiled, looking at each other, without involving Ruiz in his complicity. The sun shone brightly through the window, and the room looked much more beautiful than the night before. You could even see the polished wooden beams and the large lamp hanging from the ceiling with a very short golden chain. It was large in diameter, with metal projections and edges that looked like legs trying to adhere to the ceiling.

-I hope she doesn't leave today, doctor, on this splendid day. "I want to show you our fields," said Norberto.

-My son will take him for a ride, I hope he enjoys our hospitality. It is an honor for us.

Then, when the three of them got up from the table, the old man rested his hands on Ruiz's shoulders.

-You tried to save my son, I know that. So he doesn't feel bad. It would be so beautiful for him to feel part of our family.

As he said this, he glanced over Ruiz's right shoulder. Norberto was behind. Bernardo did not know what the intense blue eyes directed at his

son were saying, but as for forty-eight hours, many things had passed over him, as if he were a small insect dodging death between the footsteps of giants.

The three left together, but the old man separated from them to go to a shed on the other side of the road. Ruiz had not been able to see any of this when he arrived. The field was very green around the house, an immense green carpet interrupted by the dirt road. There were no trees, and yet there seemed to be no need for them. It was pure plain. The sun was splendidly suitable as an ornament rather than an essence. It is true that without the sun nothing would have developed, but Ruiz knew that even in the darkest caves life grows. Forms of life not necessarily dependent on light. Humans are the ones who need to see to get rid of fear, and the warmth of the sun is like a shelter and a maternal caress. But under the rocks, in the deepest seas and under the earth, life reproduces even more intensely, perhaps. That's why he looked at the sun like someone looking at a subordinate, at an annoying servant who brings a useful but dispensable lamp.

Norberto and Ruiz got into the jeep. Larriere drove along the road away from the town. He had seen a couple of people in the square, but those who now found the way were workers in the fields, people who lived in the surrounding area.

"They spend most of their time on their land, some work for us," said Norberto.

When they arrived, some men approached the jeep and started talking to Larriere. They offered condolences for Vicente's death, but immediately changed the subject. They talked about crops, about seeds, about a couple of workers who had fallen ill. They all had sun-beaten faces and broad backs covered in cotton shirts, scarves around their necks, hats, and pants with cuffs.

The foreman leaned an elbow on the car, looking at Ruiz from time to time, while he spoke with Larriere. Ruiz contemplated the movement of workers. Some were heading towards the fields on the left, planted with yellow. Others were already working on some intense green hectares. In the center there were some covered nurseries.

-Well, I'll let you work...- he heard Larriere say, and turning to the doctor, he said:

-Let's visit the nurseries. You will like them.

They drove a couple more kilometers to the door of the sheds. They got down and walked a few meters between old pots placed on the sides of the narrow and aromatic path. Once inside, Ruiz stood before what he saw, more than fifteen rows of flower beds of all kinds. He would not have known how to classify them even if he had had weeks to do so. Each row had a sign

pinned with the name in Latin, but this said nothing to him. He only identified roses, chrysanthemums and gardenias. Norberto accompanied him along the paths between the plants, until they reached the section of the coves, which opened like enormous white bells whose yellow pendulum swung almost obsceniously. Very few like these flowers, brutal in a certain sense, not very beautiful and pa nothing delicate or exquisite. Norberto realized that he had stopped expressly before them.

-There are few of us who grow and sell calla lilies, doctor.

-They are almost undesirable, Larriere. In my aunt's country house there was a huge calla lily plant. In summer I couldn't get close. She was afraid of the wasps and bees that constantly surrounded her.

-It's true, doctor. But you don't have to be afraid. We are also beekeepers.

They left through the back door and met men dressed in white overalls with their heads covered. They manipulated honeycombs and thousands of bees flew around. Ruiz didn't want to get any closer. Norberto laughed.

-Oh, doctor. He spends his life among blood and corpses, and is afraid of simple bees.

Ruiz did not answer, he felt in an inferior situation. He remembered the summers at his aunt's house. On Sunday afternoons he heard the hum of the swarms invading the garden, and he was forced to remain locked up in the house.

-Are you afraid of insects, doctor?

Bernardo Ruiz remembered what he had seen in the operating room. If he had panicked, he would have died of a heart attack. But it wasn't that, but a fear that was growing like underground. Bulking the surface of his awareness.

Then two old men passed in front of them, bare-chested, with their pants unbuttoned and barefoot. They came from the latrines, and they looked excessively thin. But they couldn't help but notice their bulging bellies, just like the one Vicente Larriere had had. For the first time in several days, Ruiz began to think like a doctor. A disease was affecting the inhabitants of that place. It was not polyps that Vicente had suffered, but parasites. Something in the water or food spread them. But if he thought about it better, what had come out of Vicente's abdomen could not be classified that way. And perhaps, too, he had done nothing but dream.

-Are those the sick men the foreman spoke of?

-Yes doctor.

-I could analyze his blood and secretions, if he allows me.

-What for, doctor? They no longer have salvation, they already know it and that is why they do not complain, like my brother did.

-I don't understand.

-Look around you, Dr. Ruiz. Look at the beauty of the flowers, look at the fields cultivated with wheat and sunflowers. Look at the corn, doctor. Life grows in them, but beneath them the dead remains remain. What dries out falls and becomes part of what the roots take for food. We're all going to die, doctor. We are immersed in death from birth, and they, the small beings, grow within, and we are their servants. But somehow the beauty of the flowers and the music of the wind over the fields compensate us.

-There are no trees, no birds. This is not normal.

-Yes it is, it depends on what part of nature you want to prevail. I'll take him to see our sheep.

They got back into the Jeep and drove ten kilometers south. They came to some fields where white sheep were grazing. They got down and walked to the fences. Larriere jumped and dragged one of them, holding it by the wool on its back. The dogs guarding them barked, jumping and wagging their tails around their owner.

-Touch, doctor.

Ruiz caressed the animal. He seemed dirty, rough and unpleasant to her. When he removed his hand, it was full of fleas. He shook and rubbed his hands on his clothes, but he didn't know how to get them off of him. While Larriere couldn't stop laughing at him, he tried to advise him:

-Don't despair, doctor. In a few minutes they will leave alone. The temperature of the human body does not suit them.

Then Ruiz saw the fleas jump from his hands to the ground or to the sheep that was next to them. The dogs also received some, scratched desperately against the ground for a few moments, and then got used to it.

-My God, and when do they shear them?

-Shear them?

Norberto Larriere continued laughing. No more than two days after the death of his brother, he was laughing out loud under the sun and in the middle of the field. Surrounded by what he loved, in the middle of millions of creatures that, without being noticed, except when they wanted to, decided the way of life and death of the men who lived there. There were two of them, nothing more. Even the dogs and sheep outnumbered them. And what can we say, then, Ruiz said to himself, about the small beasts that the human eye can barely perceive, and that dominate everything, invading and eating away at bodies. Maybe even before death.

-We never shear them, doctor.

And they returned to the house just at noon. He was sunstroke and had a headache. He didn't want to have lunch and stayed in his room with a bottle of water. He fell asleep with his head sideways on the pillow, looking at the jug on the nightstand next to him, trying to catch a glimpse of the beings that inhabited the water. Beings that have no face. Because although the insects They have a part of the body that could be called anterior, and sometimes, not always, they carry the sense organs there, it cannot be called a face, much less a face.

And water can become wind. Dr. Bernardo Ruiz knew that the elements of water change their liquid state into a gaseous state, being dragged, enveloped and subjected to the mercy of the wind, which is another element of nature, another force that it uses to dominate the world. So the wind he now heard could have been born from the still water in his clear glass jar. A wind that was very similar to Debussy's music, its arpeggios, its harmonies, the subtle touches of the keyboard on the low and high notes imitating the ethereal sound of the wind over an abandoned temple on a moonlit night, or that which blows like a gentle breeze through the cornfields.

A piano. But he didn't remember seeing any piano in the living room last night or this morning. He got up and washed his face. He was hungry. He had not had lunch, and luckily the nausea he had felt when returning from the field had passed. He went down to the living room, there was no one. The piano continued to sound a little louder. He followed the path of sound, as a rat would have followed the music of the Pied Piper. He crossed the dining room, entered a hallway, passed two open doors that led to a library and a games room. In the background there was a light that came out from under a door. The music was louder. He reached out and rapped with his knuckles. The music stopped.

"Come in," said the voice of Natalia Larriere.

Bernardo entered and saw her sitting in the armchair in front of the piano. He had his black hair tied back in a ponytail with a strand falling over his forehead. With one of her hands, which were very white and pale, with long and delicate fingers, she brushed the hair from her forehead and smiled.

-They told me that she didn't eat anything. Feel better?

-Yes, thanks.

-Then accompany me to the kitchen and I'll prepare something for you.

Without giving him time to refuse, she stood up, put her right arm under Ruiz's left and led him to the kitchen. She took some leftover roast beef out of the refrigerator and made two sandwiches. She poured a glass of cold white wine and put everything on a tray.

"Let's go back to the music room," she said, carrying the tray and motioning for him to follow her.

She sat down again at the piano, but not before she had placed the plate on the low table in front of the sofa where Bernardo was sitting. While he was eating, he heard her playing. She was a good performer. She must have been playing for fifteen minutes, when she stopped.

-She is a great pianist.

-Don't exaggerate, doctor. Fair, I would say. She has been studying music since she was five, so I had no choice but to learn something. What music you like?

-The one you played. Also opera, my father-in-law is a great fan.

-Do you want to hear me sing something? The few times I have an audience, I try to take advantage of them. No one new ever comes here.

-So he also sings...

-Again, regular.

She began to sing a melody accompanying herself on the piano. She had a beautiful contralto voice, deep and smooth. It was like the wind she had heard before, wet like a breeze carrying rumors of a storm. She sang in French, and there was a four-verse chorus that was repeated. Ruiz recognized, although his notions of French were almost zero, the verse that stated the name of the town. It was almost ten minutes of that long ballad, which rose in pitch and accelerated in its middle part, but decreased again and became sad in each chorus. In the last one, the piano faded away, as if it were literally disappearing from the room, taking with it not only the music but even the memory of time. Leaving only an anguish and a premonition, or first the premonition and then the consequent despair.

Natalia turned around and asked if he liked her.

-I found it shocking.

She smiled with a naivety that was like a trap and a pair of tongs that trapped Bernardo Ruiz's heart.

-It's an old French ballad. It passed from generation to generation, and my grandmother brought it when she emigrated and arrived in the country. For more than three hundred years it had no written music, it was sung by troubadours in the cities and by peasants in the plains. Almost a hundred years ago they wrote the music, they say that Debussy himself was the one who composed it, but that was never proven.

-It has certain reminiscences of the mature Debussy, it seems to me.

-That's right, and I'm glad you are such a wise man, doctor.

-Not at all, Natalia.

-Don't be modest, I bet you also write poems.

-No, I'm not capable. But...since you mention it, my wife, my partner, was actually a poet. And last night I was remembering a poem of his. I don't know why that one especially...but anyway.

-Recite it, doctor.

-Don't be ashamed...

-It is not my intention, and you should not feel ashamed za.

Then Ruiz began to recite Cecilia's poem just as he remembered it, and he didn't think he strayed too far from the exact words. It was a poem that talked about ants that enter a man's body, climb the vertebrae and nest at the base of the brain. It was a typical theme and atmosphere for Cecilia, her obsession with anatomy and the degradation of corpses. He had written it before moving in with Ruiz, but she liked to recite it while she was in bed, reviewing her writing. While he was showering, he heard her voice, which sounded like a line of ants in a forest under the rain. Cecilia had gone through the second surgery when she began reciting that poem more frequently, trying to correct it based on how it sounded out loud. As if she expected someone else, at some point, to sing it.

-It's very beautiful, doctor. I'd like to meet her.

-She died three days ago, Natalia.

-I'm sorry. She must have been a very sensitive woman, very perceptive, above all.

-She She was, but why does she say it?

-Because that poem is very similar, in a sense at least, to the verses of the ballad that I sang to him. It's very long, but I'll try to summarize it. The song says that the human heart has pillars of different degrees, and these pillars form cavities, like grottoes. In one nest the beings that make man feel love or hate, in another those that make him good or bad, and in the third lives the destiny of each one. These creatures live between the pillars like between the trunks of the trees in a forest where it is always night. And the night birds go out hunting and catch the little creatures of the heart. Those that survive, then, are those that make up each person's nature.

-And the chorus?

She-she It says something like this: “If you put your ear close to a stone, you will hear an old melody; It is the ancient heart of the wicked, more eternal than the rock of the world.”

-And what that means, I don't understand.

-Doctor, the creatures that survive are always the smartest, even smarter than the birds that try to hunt them, because they deliver the others to the beaks of those birds. There is no way to survive without a streak of cruel cunning, don't you agree?

-I can't say yes, Natalia. What about mercy?

-It's for the weak, doctor. Or rather for cowards, because weakness does not necessarily imply lack of courage, instead cowards are an absolute in themselves. Like my brother.

It was the second time that day that she had heard Vicente Larriere spoken of disparagingly, and he had been even more lapidary than her brother.

-I would like to ask you a huge favor, doctor.

-Of course.

-It would be an honor for me to put music to his wife's poem. I promise to have it ready before you leave and I will sing it for you. That tells me?

-I think Cecilia would feel very honored.

She formed a complete smile, not only with her mouth, but her eyes and the slight redness of her cheeks participated in it to give her that expression of intact beauty, barely touched, virgin in body and soul. But not a sick virginity or a victim of repression, but rather like a field of untrodden grass that hides sounds, water and blood. A field whose greatest fear is always that of being devastated by the sharp blades of the propellers of time.

During the rest of the afternoon, until almost six o'clock, they had tea in the dining room and continued talking about the countryside that Ruiz had visited. They also talked about the town, and Natalia spoke to him about the neighbors like someone telling unimportant anecdotes. Then Norberto and the father arrived. They came dirty with dust and perspiration, and laughing.

-So while we work, my little sister has tea with the doctor.

-Someone has to dedicate time to our guest.

"It seems very good to me, daughter," said the old man. Then he looked at Ruiz. -Did he play for you?

-Yes, and he also sang exquisitely. She must be proud of her daughter, sir.

-I am, there can be no doubt about that. There are children and children, doctor, I don't know if she understands me.

Ruiz thought he understood perfectly.

-We have to clean up and change for the festival. You're going to accompany us, doctor.

-What festival?

-Today Saturday night we have a festival in the town square. There are fairs, quermeses, shows that will interest you, surely.

-I don't know if I'm in the mood for a party, you know that a few days ago I lost my partner.

It was the first time that anyone had hinted at the slightest need for mourning or sadness after the funeral.

-For that reason, doctor, do you understand me? For that very reason, I repeat it to you," said the old man, placing a hand on Ruiz's right shoulder, like a father, as if he were closer to his heart than Renato, whose distance and acrimony had hurt him like an unbreakable aftertaste of resentment for what Ruiz had done to the daughter.

So he accepted.

Norberto lent him some pants and a new shirt, in addition to the ones he already had. Underwear and leather boots.

-The square is going to be muddy after the rain the other day, it takes longer to dry than the rest of the land. There is a decline in that area, and it is not uncommon for it to flood when it rains a lot.

"And isn't it an impediment to the festival?" He asked as he dressed.

-Not at all. You see, doctor. The festivals are held after rains like the one we experienced yesterday. It's a rebirth, you know?

Ruiz didn't understand anything. But that new environment, and at the same time strange in terms of rarities, lifted his spirits and made him forget the life that awaited him in Buenos Aires.

At eight at night they set off towards the center of town. The four of them got into the jeep and traveled the route that Ruiz had also taken at night just a day ago. They maintained the same disposition that they had in the vehicle as they walked towards the square, old Gustave and his son Norberto in front, Natalia and Bernardo Ruiz behind, arm in arm. They both looked at each other from time to time, commenting in few words on the hectic life that night around the square. She wore a black velvet dress, fitted to the shape of her slim body, closed almost to the neck, with a necklace of jet-colored pearls that shone brighter than the white pearls in the light of the garlands that had been placed on the mounted poles. specifically for that day.

-You look very attractive in that white shirt of my brother, doctor.

Her shirt was silk, a fine fabric that slightly showed the dark, curly hair on her chest. She had put on a peculiar fragrance that Norberto had lent her with a wink of his eye after shaving.

-Thank you, Natalia. I think it's you who deserves the praise, not me.

-Then comply, doctor.

Ruiz smiled, looking down like a teenager. Suddenly, he didn't know what to say. She clung closer to him and they continued together, knowing there was no need to say more. The other Larriere had disappeared among the rest and were no longer seen.

Now, the bustle of the square required his attention. The surrounding businesses were illuminated, a strong yellow light came out of the old windows and doors, interrupted by shadows of people coming and going. Bicycles and many people walking passed through the streets. Ruiz saw for the second time some of the boys who had left the abandoned buildings when he arrived in town. There were many dogs, almost as many as there were people. They were tame, they walked side by side with their owners, sometimes they smelled each other when they crossed paths. They hardly barked. The bustle came from the people, peasants who worked their own lands, probably, but most of them must have been employees of the Larriere. From the bakery came an intense smell of freshly baked bread, cakes and anise-scented cookies. The fodder was a meeting place, many would meet there and then leave for the square. The Aranguren bazaar, on the other hand, was closed, and that block seemed to not exist, because the darkness was a stain, like an erased sector in a painting.

He did not ask the cause, and he knew that he would not find Aranguren among the festival-goers. During the day they had placed poles around the square, and from them hung garlands with lamps with a few watts of power. There was a moon, and thanks to it the square was more illuminated than by artificial light. But among the bushes that proliferated irregularly there were shady surfaces where dogs hid, frightened by the continuous passage of people. Today the square seemed larger than when he had seen it when he arrived, perhaps the darkness contributed to this impression. Shadows, like mirrors, sometimes dilate distances.

There was music too. A sound like a barrel organ came from all directions. Ruiz, whose memory of the circuses had remained pleasantly attached to his memory, tried to find the origin, and led Natalia in one direction or another.

-What are you looking for, doctor?

-To the organ grinder.

She smiled and gestured with her arm to a stall right in front of them, barely illuminated by the reflection of moonlight on the wood of the stall.

There was an old man with a long beard, bald, playing the accordion. The melody was unknown, but similar to the monotonous and enveloping music of the carousels in a suburban neighborhood square.

They came closer. The old man looked up at Bernardo. His head emerged from the shadow to enter the halo of light from a lamp that swayed with the light breeze that night. Ruiz had not been mistaken when he saw him from a distance, he was bald and had a long gray beard. But the smell of his clothes was unbearable. Not even the grills, next to the plaza where meat and sausages were roasted, could he make the man's smell go unnoticed. Then the old man asked:

-A collaboration, please. His accent was French, like old Larriere's. He must have been her age, maybe older. And when Bernardo was about to take a coin out of his pocket, he saw the old man's feet. They were barefoot and sunk in the mud, where some beetles struggled to get on their legs. The small legs of the insects adhered to the old man's ulcerated skin and ascended, slowly, but upward.

Ruiz left two coins in the old man's palm.

"Merci," he heard him say.

Natalia approached the organ grinder and kissed him on the cheek.

-Bye, uncle.

Ruiz stood looking at her as if she saw a stranger.

-He is the cousin of an aunt who lives in Buenos Aires.

-And because...

-Why...what?

-Nothing. Do you want something to drink?

-A glass of sweet wine, please.

They walked towards the drinks stand. It was a long table beautifully set, with a cream-colored tablecloth, open bottles and crystal glasses. People came up, chose their drink, the manager served, gave the change and the customer left pleased. The boys had fruit juices, and curiously, hot coffee.

Ruiz asked for sweet wine and was served two glasses. They drank walking towards one of the nearby stalls. Some kids ran by and nearly knocked over their glasses. Natalia's dress was stained, but it was barely visible in the dark fabric.

-It is not noticeable except in the aroma. "My father and my brother are going to think that you want to get me drunk," she said, with a smile as sweet as the wine that moistened her lips.

Ruiz held her arm and couldn't help the urge to kiss her on the lips. She didn't resist, her mouth even seemed to try to follow Ruiz's mouth when he moved a few inches away from her. They didn't say anything, they didn't even smile. They looked ahead and suddenly found themselves looking at what the others were also looking at closely.

A man sitting behind a metal table covered with a cloth, quite dirty because of what was on it, several dishes and small containers without lids, from whose edges came worms, white larvae, cockroaches that walked around the edges of the dishes and along the tablecloth, ants and a couple of spiders as big as your fist. The man's hands were busy getting the food into his mouth from one source and another, also too busy preventing the insects from escaping from his lips before being ground and killed. He did not look at the others, but he was focused on controlling the entire zoo that he did not intend to escape, but only to keep moving. And that man used his intelligence to keep them together, saying from time to time, and with his mouth full, something like “my little ones, don't run away, my little ones.”

That was what Ruiz thought he understood, and the wine in his glass moved with a slight vibration of his pulse while he watched, enraptured, how the man fed on insects not for fun, although that was the intention of putting on such a spectacle, but out of necessity. As if his digestive system impelled him to satisfy his hunger not with the beautiful and aromatic preparations that usually flatter the human palate. That subject's hunger had another kind of satisfaction, evidently.

Ruiz began to feel nauseous, but he swallowed and stopped himself. However, he felt pale and his forehead was sweaty.

Such was the first show of the fair that both visited. Natalia, without letting go of her arm, united to him now also by that kiss that constituted a stronger bond than linking her hands, because it involved complicity. Then they saw some dogs running towards an open space, and they headed towards the post that was built there. A light fell directly on the place, and as they approached they made their way among those returning from that sector. Natalia greeted some acquaintances and introduced Bernardo. They greeted him as if they had already heard of him. They continued until they found the thin, dark man who was lying on a blanket. Ruiz didn't find anything special, the man seemed to be sleeping. Maybe he's gotten bored of waiting for spectators, he was about to tell Natalia. Then he realized that the clothes were moving, but the man was not. He moved as if there were wind, but there was none, and the movement did not produce folds but a continuous slide. The man opened his eyes in his dark face, and they were clear. It wasn't clothes he was wearing, but a layer, perhaps several, of ants that walked on top of him, covering his body completely, except for his eyes now open like two empty vessels. He was lying on his back, and soon after he changed his position, then the ants moved towards the spaces that separated from the ground. Every few minutes the man moved a little, then sat down, then stood or turned around as if he were parading. The ants

became excited and moved faster . When the man opened his mouth, they entered. Ruiz could see the sinuous movement of his Adam's apple as he swallowed.

Ruiz turned around and placed a hand over his mouth. Natalia rubbed his back, comforting him.

-You'll get used to it, Bernardo.

He looked at her and back at the man. Those waves of ants caused him a vertigo similar to that of a raging sea on a stormy, moonless night, where sky and sea merge, where feet and head change positions and vertigo is the master of the world.

She was seen only for a moment, she returned with a glass of fresh water. He drank in one gulp and the perspiration on her forehead began to dry.

-I'm better now.

-Then let's continue. It would be a shame if you missed the festival.

Natalia held onto his arm again, pushing him, forcing him with a tenderness that made those forces seem like the weakest stratagems in the world. And yet they were the strongest, because otherwise how else could Bernardo have held his head up as if nothing was happening, as if that fair were an ordinary fair, like the one that can be found in any town or neighborhood of a city? any. But he had not visited all the fairs, so he could not know what the world could hide behind the appearance of what is usually called normal.

From Natalia's eyes, from her sure voice, firm and hollow like an amphora, a clay vessel built by native hands and placed in a glass case in the room they had just left, the truth overflowed. And the truth is simply that, naked flesh showing the frizzy hair of a pubis devoid of evil or perversion. The truth of the world is beautiful like the belly of a twelve-year-old girl who has had her first menstruation. It is beautiful and it is terribly hard, painful and unbearable.

That was what he now saw, both of them standing in front of the next stall. An excessively obese woman, almost naked if it weren't for the long hair that formed a sad and torn veil over her breasts. She was sitting on a chair that barely supported the weight of her body, appearing to balance on a cane. But this was not what was peculiar, but the characteristics of her skin, or rather the lack of it. She was covered in wine-red and purple sores, others white where something moved. The woman had her arms extended and open as if showing tattoos, but in reality it was her ulcers that she tried to keep displayed as if they were all part of a single figure, and whose whole could only be seen by opening her arms and extending her legs completely. Gray worms lived in the sores, and some cocoons broke and released

countless butterflies that flew away and were lost in the darkness or died shortly after in the light of the lamps.

That spectacle was beautiful, Ruiz had to admit it. He looked at Natalia, who was crying at such beauty, then he couldn't help but feel a tenderness that he had never felt for Cecilia. Cecilia was strong and she did not cry, she Cecilia needed comfort but she had never accepted it, just as she did not accept pity nor did she recognize forgiveness as part of her vocabulary. Irony was the instrument of Cecilia's eyes and tongue, only in her hands was there some poetry.

They looked around and looked for the next stall. A man standing with his feet together and his hands glued to the sides of his body. At first Ruiz couldn't distinguish his features. He seemed to have his head down looking at the ground. He was dressed in a gray suit, his shirt was dark. His polished shoes were the only thing that shined. He made an intense humming noise, and Ruiz moved a little closer to listen, peering over the watching boys. Natalia held his arm as if in that gentle way she was preventing him from falling into an abyss.

Bernardo realized that the head of the man standing there was an open skull with torn flesh and the remains of a faded face, crumpled like a latex mask that rested lifelessly on his chest. The upper edge of a honeycomb protruded from the open skull, and hundreds of wasps entered and exited and hovered around, also surrounding the body of the man, who in some inexplicable way was standing, because he must undoubtedly be dead.

Frowning his eyebrows and narrowing his eyes, Bernardo tried to get a better look at the honeycomb. Natalia whispered to him not to get too close, the wasps were not trustworthy, not even for them. He didn't ask what he meant by that, if they were never trustworthy to anyone, but curiosity got the better of him. He had seen a flicker of the dead face, and the movement of a finger on the right hand. Perhaps it had been the wasps that caused such movements, but a while later, when they were leaving, they heard the man's voice, saying:

-Thank you.

Two boys were giving him coins and two bills. low-value tees, as he extended his hand with his palm facing up. And Ruiz saw the man's face, now clearly, the immensely distressed eyes of someone who has no hope other than a life no larger or less noisy than a room filled, completely and absurdly, with wasps.

Bernardo Ruiz looked down at the ground and put his hands to his face. Natalia took them away from him and made him look into her eyes. They were a comfort, a refreshing balm for what she had just seen, and when Natalia had thus healed her injured eyes, they resumed their walk. They hadn't finished seeing even half of the stalls, and the night of the festival was just beginning.

They passed a choir of mixed voices singing a lullaby in German. The lighting there was greater and the singers were standing in two rows, the women in front and the men on a platform behind. Ruiz recognized some faces that he had seen that morning in the field. The voices were pleasant and not intemperate as might be expected from an amateur choir.

They passed the drinks stand again.

-Do you want another glass of Moscato?

-No, dear. Nothing for now, thanks.

He grabbed her hand tightly and they continued their way through the square already full of people, dodging dogs, greeting acquaintances, shaking hands that left a sticky feeling in Ruiz's palms. They reached the curb and went down to the street. Somewhat isolated from the rest, there was a little-visited stall, but not without some curious onlookers. There were no children, only old men, all men, looking casually and adjusting their glasses to see better. They had bulging bellies but were extremely skinny. Among them must have been the two old men who had left work that day, and again Ruiz told himself that as a doctor he should have shown more interest, having insisted on doing a physical examination of those affected. However, no one complained or sought medical assistance. Illness is part of health, he had told himself many times. Not an entity that must be eliminated like an insect crushed by a foot or killed by an insecticide. Health, like death, are states of a single continuous period of time.

A man is unrepeatable, a man dies and is lost forever. Insects die and are born in millions. They are eternal for that reason, they are immortal because the number and the figure are on their side. They say that God is a verb, and it is also a figure. It exists because a number determines it. Not the number one, nor the zero as many say, but always more than the number two. Two is not enough, three is already everything. And in the whole, the absolute, lies the reason for God's existence.

Because a man who dies is unique, we who survive are the ones who wrap him in a shroud, so that the earth does not hit him so brutally, does not hurt him as quickly as the teeth of a mad dog. So, then, as we make them, so do the spiders, from whom we have learned to build shrouds because they know how to weave the exact material for the rest of the flesh.

There, in front of all who dared to look, on the packed earth of the street just in front of the bazaar, was the body of a man shaking off the premature shroud that a hundred, perhaps a thousand spiders were weaving to envelop him, moving over his body like old and wise weavers from a factory closed a long time ago and who have stayed forever because nothing awaits them at home. Only their hands, their paws, remain faithful to them, only the idea of carrying out their ancestral work consoles them from the

loneliness and emptiness of their wombs no longer capable of generating offspring.

"Dad," Natalia said.

Ruiz recognized Larriere in one of the old men who turned his back to them.

When he turned around, they saw that his eyes were red and drops were falling from his nose. His daughter approached him to clean it.

"Thank you," she said, and she looked at Bernardo with a sad smile. Excuse these old man's nonsense, doctor.

Bernardo patted him on the back with confidence, the other appreciated that show of affection.

The three returned to the square. Now there were many people gathered in the center, and many more were going in the same direction, commenting among themselves. The boys ran ahead of their parents, accompanied by the dogs. Norberto met with her family, he came from the obese woman's place, and commented that he had spoken a few words with her.

Someone climbed onto the platform that occupied the center of the square, next to the mast, which was used to hang lamps and illuminate the improvised stage. The time for the biggest show had arrived, Ruiz thought. Maybe a keynote speech and then a performance by some music ensemble. It was nothing like that, however. The man simply welcomed everyone. He was short, thin and broad-shouldered. He wore a green jacket over a collarless shirt. His pants were tight and he wore boots. He looked like a slightly effeminate master of ceremonies, for his face shone with dust collected on his cheeks and around his eyes. He moved like a variety show artist, like a mime, making the gesture of taking out a hat that he didn't have.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, when the choir stopped singing a wordless melody, just a silent chorus of guttural voices like strangled birds. The main voice of our people will sing us a new song today.

He extended his arm toward where the Larriere had stood to watch. Everyone applauded. It was Natalia they were looking for. She soon separated from him without first forgetting to give him a small pinch on the arm, making him complicit in the joy she felt, then, while the master of ceremonies helped her get on stage, she turned around for a moment to look at him and winked at him. the left eye.

She stood in the middle of the stage, smoothed the skirt of her dress and brushed her hair away from her forehead. She looked really simple and beautiful, Ruiz told himself. But it was when singing that the true meaning of

the word beauty encompassed everything that Natalia represented. Because her voice was not a complement to her beauty, but rather the essential thing. Her contralto voice seemed to form and mature with every second it lasted and every note she uttered. And it didn't just come from her mouth, but from the darkness that enveloped the square, from the space without trees and the streets with the smell of wet earth, she came from that nearby cemetery similar to a sea of bushes.

She was singing Cecilia's poem, and Ruiz wondered how he had been able to put it to music so soon, with so little time between that same afternoon and that night that was now passing. No instrument accompanied her, it was an a cappella song, but Ruiz had never heard a voice such that it did not need anything more than its own company, because she was the wind that blew in his throat, the echo and the hollow of his mouth, a box of resonance more faithful and larger than any cave buried hundreds of meters away and unexplored by any man.

Cecilia's poem then took on a meaning that he had not seen before, that he had not understood and that perhaps Cecilia had been looking for when she recited it over and over again in her bed, with a pencil in her hand, revising it, correcting it, searching in the verses the secret of the words, and in the words the symbolism of the letters. And even further, the music that he did not know how to create because she was forbidden to him, and that now emerged through another woman whose talent differed from his, but was equally revealing. One and another, and perhaps a third, the woman who had taught Cecilia to contemplate the beauty of insects and the underlying harmony in the contours of a bone.

The song lasted several minutes. The lamps hanging from the mast swayed with the soft wind that had recently risen, and illuminated Natalia's figure with movements and games, projecting the sound, molding it to the shape of the wind's hands, until dispersing it throughout the entire width of the sky. Square. Ruiz felt that everyone present was moved by listening, even the phenomena and strange creatures that had not moved from their positions had their eyes or ears attentive towards whoever was singing. The boys were standing still next to their parents, their heads held high, their curious gaze on the woman on stage, the dogs had sat down and a couple of them were howling with a faint whimper sadder than the song of a lost wolf.

Then Natalia looked towards those two dogs ten meters away. Her voice stopped, dying softly with the last word of the poem. And that last word was a name, a distinctive applied to a bone in the human body that referred to a mythological god who was capable of holding the entire weight of the world on his back.

The base of a skull. The support of the world.

As if all that weight could be supported even by water like a sphere, a balloon full of sounds and music, of voices that travel along the highways of the wind.

A god who was capable of resting for moments and depositing his burden on a weak support more ethereal than air. Like an irresponsible person who is distracted and rests, and ready to pick up the load again, he sees that it has disappeared, carried by the hands of the wind with gloomy voices and disastrous howls.

The force necessary to keep the world in balance at a static point is the same as if it remained in continuous motion. Ruiz knew this, he had been taught some physics and logic. The mysteries of the world, the struggle between good and evil, the cracks that sink into everyday life and give off the despicable vapors of rot and bodily death, often respond to the same principles of the precarious science invented by man. . The brain invents its own death, the explanation of life and life itself are born simultaneously. Death is in the human brain. His own creator god and his destroyer.

Those who look into the cracks open in the squares of those towns like the one Ruiz now visited, see the caravans and carts of those who collect corpses from house to house to take them to places where they pile up like mountains, which will then burn until they become in lost ashes, dragged and rendered useless by the wind.

Natalia came down from the stage, and Ruiz didn't even realize that he himself was the one who had approached her and extended a hand to help her. No one applauded, because silence was more satisfactory in that case.

Old Larriere hugged his daughter.

-How could you find that song, daughter? I thought she was lost...-he said.

-It's a poem by someone who was the doctor's wife, dad...

The old man looked at Ruiz with amazement, with admiration.

-Tell me, doctor. What was his wife's last name?

-Tejada.

-And her mother's?

Ruiz remembered for a few seconds.

-Gonçalvez.

The old man seemed to recognize her last name and put an arm over Ruiz's shoulders.

-Doctor, you can't imagine how right I was when I told you that I would like to have you in the family. There are people who know more than others, you understand? People who sense what is in a lightless hole, and even what is hidden and palpable on the asphalt at midday on any given summer. Women are especially susceptible to that. His wife, may she rest in peace, sensed this when composing that poem. And I imagine that others in his family were also able to see, for example, the fear or terror that advances like a swarm of wasps.

Ruiz imagined Cecilia and her cousin Leticia on a beach, as children, watching, lying on the sand, how a spider devoured a lobster.

They returned home in silence, listening to the music of the cicadas, surrounded by fireflies fleeing the swarms of nocturnal mosquitoes that sprang from the undergrowth along the road. The Larriere men each went to their rooms and left Ruiz and Natalia alone in the living room of the room, in front of the fireplace that crackled and attracted mosquitoes instead of scaring them away.

They both had their eyes on the fire, silent and perhaps thinking about the same thing. They were looking for something to say that meant an irreversible step, something from which they could not go back. That's why they chose to continue in silence and caress each other's hand on the back of the sofa, then the hands touched the other's, then the body, until they reached the shoulders and brought their heads closer to each other until their lips met.

They kissed for a long time, breathing only what was necessary to continue in that state, light as the smoke released from the fire next to them, protected by the ceiling whose beams they could not see, but between which new cobwebs had formed during the day. And at the moment when they abandoned themselves to the feeling of the body surrendered to the other body, while her lips kissed his ears, and he kissed her neck and the base of her breasts, the spiders consumed their daily ration of flies trapped in fabrics.

Bernardo and Natalia got up from the couch and walked hand in hand towards the hallway that led to the bedrooms. Their lips barely came off and they walked around the room practically blind. They arrived at the door of her room. He made a very small gesture of turning away, as a concession to good manners. After all, it was said, he was an intruder in a good family's home. But she held his hand, they entered the room together and closed the door.

She settled down on the bed on the sheep's wool quilt. He sat next to her and began to undo the zipper of her dress, at the same time kissing the inches of skin that she was revealing. Natalia pulled her dress down to her waist. Then he undid the clasp of her bra and she fell onto the bed.

Bernardo then knelt in front of her and began to kiss her breasts as if he were a god to whom he prayed. She lay down, he took the rest of her clothes off. He took off his shirt and pants, and no light or sound was needed to know that what they were doing had been decided perhaps long before, perhaps centuries before, by an ancient tradition that included not only sad duties but also events like the one that was happening now: ecstasy and pleasure, ephemeral and fleeting, but no less essential to later fulfill the others with a lucid mind and blood at a temperature consistent with the corpses that are collected from house to house, from town to town.

Natalia's heart was beating with a drumbeat similar to that of a child playing a drum in the middle of a battle. It was sweet and exciting the same time. Ruiz's body, on the other hand, was a sum of bodies of many men falling with all their weight after being felled by cannons and bullets onto the hard forearms of the earth. That was her, earth where he fell, and the earth molded itself to his shape, enveloping him.

She now had her legs trapping his legs. Ruiz felt them rise and fall until they tightened and closed on her buttocks. One of Natalia's arms pressed Bernardo's head against her neck, her other arm pushed her body against his. She had trapped him and wouldn't let him go. But he had no desire to flee from that bed. She was like a praying mantis, whose triangular green face would devour the male's head at any moment.

He knew it, and yet he had to finish what he had started. There are things that cannot be stopped, flows that, like prayers, should not be truncated if we do not want to fall into blasphemy or cardiac syncope. Moments like these are the rare moments where the body and the so-called soul are one thing, more consistent than air, more substantial than any of the elements that make up the world, something indivisible, even if on its own it were as useless as a stone. .

When he felt that everything was over, he screamed, feeling a tingling running down his spine. He started at the base of his back, where she had rested his feet, then moved up to his neck and head. Ruiz lay down on one side, agitated and with a strange ringing in his ears.

Natalia rested her head on his abdomen, caressing him, playing with the hair on her chest while she said something, but she couldn't understand her. She was singing, perhaps, that's why she didn't notice the cramps he was suffering in the muscles of her abdomen. Natalia's mouth was still inhabited by the song, populated with lives that she created with that ballad whose foreign accents were melancholic.

Then Bernardo saw on the ceiling of the room, the cobwebs hanging from beam to beam, and the small figures of spiders moving in many directions as if on roads that led to places of food, reproduction and death.

Ruiz fell asleep while his heartbeat slowed to the exact limit of normal. And at that border he moved to the realm of dream, to that country house where he continued to assemble a body with the material indicated by a television program. But there was no longer any television, and the body was almost built, except for the head.

That's what he was doing now. Sitting in front of the dining room table, he molded with his hands dirty with clay, mud and glue, the shape of a face on the still bare bone. As he laid layer upon layer of clay and then glued together blades of grass mixed with water and stones, his skin took on a brownish color. But it was only part of the scalp, the face itself was still a barely decipherable sketch. He didn't know how long he had been working without sleep, and he felt that he should put his arms down for a moment and rest.

"What do you think you're doing?" someone said.

Ruiz looked everywhere, but he was alone.

-Where are you looking, am I the one talking to you?

Then he saw that the lips of the figure, formed only by two cylinders, moved. It was the head that spoke. The rest of the body was still standing in a corner. The head addressed Ruiz with a woman's voice, kind but firm, slightly contemptuous or angry.

"What is your name?" she asked.

He suddenly hesitated. He didn't know who was talking to him, so he too had lost the exact notion, perhaps, of who he was. After thinking about it for a while, he answered:

-Hamlet. Don't you see how I have held you in my hands, wondering about life and death?

-Well, then, dear Hamlet, you will realize that these lips are annoying and too full. I think you should reduce its thickness.

-Maybe you're right.

He dedicated himself to crushing the rubber cylinders that formed them a little.

-Are they better this way?

-Yes, much better, dear Hamlet.

-I think you're wrong, my name is Victor Frankenstein.

She wrinkled the skin on her forehead, and the dried mud on it broke and fell on the table.

-It's your fault, you had told me another name a while ago.

-I'll fix it, don't worry.

He prepared a new mixture. She watched the fingers working on her forehead.

-Are you going to take long? I think I'm going to sweat and my makeup will fall off again.

-Moisture is good for the mixture.

-If you say so, Victor...

He withdrew his hands, almost angry.

-Why do you insist on calling me something else? My name is Yepetto.

-Well, this time he's a little nicer. I want a mirror, please.

He brought an oval mirror. She put it in front of her head. He didn't know what she could be thinking, that head seeing herself with her half-built face, but ro didn't seem to dislike it.

-We're going well, Yepetto.

He threw the mirror on the table and crossed his arms, staring at her.

-What happens now?

-It happens that my name is Michelangelo.

Her face twisted into a wry smile, and it looked as horribly absurd as the reason she was laughing.

-Well, well...we have made progress in our aspirations. I will demand more and more from you, then.

-Whatever you want, and even better. I am your creator.

She put on a doubtful expression.

-Are you so sure, Michelangelo?

He picked up the chair and threatened to throw it over her head.

-One more mistake and I won't hold back! You are provoking me by always calling me different names.

She, resigned, asked what her real name was.

-Leonardo.

Then she nodded, because she was beginning to be afraid of the sanity of her creator. She saw him approach and put his hands on top of her,

molding the clay again more roughly than before. She decided to remain silent, despite the horrible smell he had on her clothes, sweaty and dirty with dirt. She must have been burying people a short time before. She didn't remember having a life, but as her face began to form, and especially as she looked in the mirror, she found a resemblance to someone she knew, without knowing when or where.

Then he stopped. His hands stayed still and she looked toward the door. It had opened and a fresh breeze came in from the imminent dusk. She also heard the music, but she believed it was the wind, because her ears were still rudimentary.

-What is that, Leonardo?

He looked at her with an expression of intense contempt.

-My name is Giuseppe Verdi. And that is the chorus of my Nabucco.

Saying this, she left. The door was left open, so she could see the field where he now walked, calm and sure of where he was going. In the background there was a tree, large, and the branches moved, and around it the grass was not green but black.

The road he was traveling was a field strewn with beetles, and the sky had been invaded by locusts. The sky moved sideways, it had depth and peaks like a green sea. The ground seemed to have risen and the night sky had fallen. But he walked firmly, confidently towards the tree whose branches extended like arms with hands and fingers offering spiders, like a god who distributes food to his subjects.

He was going in search of him, towards those hands and that ceiling of cobwebs that would protect him. And the world swayed to the rhythm of a chorus on a slightly rough sea. In the middle of a night that was beginning, in that space where time is just a broken idea hanging in threads of sharp branches that tear him as he runs, fleeing, although he never knows what he can escape from, time, owner and lord of everything. , except for those steps that he has left behind and that haunt him, always.

5

In the morning, Ruiz was woken up by screams coming from the next room. The shutters were open and it was already daylight, perhaps nine or ten in the morning. He looked at the clock on the nightstand, it was just seven. It was strange that Natalia had gotten up so early. The screams, which he now realized were moans of pain, had the voice of old Larriere. He got up, but

she had nothing to wear except last night's clothes. Then he saw, on the quilt at the foot of the bed, a man's robe. Probably from Norberto, and she had left it there for when she woke up. She put on her robe and opened the door to the room. The hallway was empty, and the screams were louder. No doubt they came from the old man's room. She went out and bumped into Norberto who was carrying a steaming cup with a strong-smelling liquid.

"Good morning, Ruiz," he said simply, and he entered his father's room, closing the door.

Bernardo went to the kitchen and found Natalia sitting at the table, having breakfast.

-What's wrong with your father?

-What we have been waiting for for a while, my love. Is the process.

-What process?

-Detachment, dear. She already saw him with Vicente in the operating room.

She took him by the hand and made him sit next to her. Sunday morning was sunny, an intense light penetrated through the window that overlooked the garden.

-Sit down and let me explain to you. They're about to leave, you know?

-They?

Natalia made a gesture of annoyance; her father's screams upset her, although she pretended to be unconcerned.

-Bernardo, don't say that you don't understand after everything he saw at the fair. They, dear, come out when we are going to die. They are in our mothers' blood, we grow with them, we feed them. Then, when our time comes, they leave because we are no longer of use to them. And to get out they must break the viscera and the skin.

As she spoke, she looked at Ruiz as if he were looking at a naive and scared child. She seemed like a teacher, a patient mother who spoke calmly but sadly.

-It's painful, I know. We all have shit

Well, it's inevitable. Who is not afraid of dying in pain?

She squeezed Ruiz's hand as one of the screams became shriller, sharper than the previous ones, almost an overwhelming call of desperation and pity. Then he couldn't help the reflex of protecting and comforting her, he hugged her and felt how Natalia's head rested on her chest, breathing heavily, but safe from everything that was happening in the other room.

Norberto returned with the empty cup, left it on the counter and sat down in front of them.

-Don't worry about him, Ruiz, dad knew this would come. He was preparing to endure the pain.

-But he is suffering...

-I already know, and it's what he should do. Scream and suffer. Aren't we born the same way? Who says that death must be peaceful, silent and medicated? They know it, that is their function, although they are not aware of it.

"It's the process, dear," Natalia added without separating from him, and his voice echoed through her body as if it were traveling through the empty spaces of her lungs. She wondered if they were really empty.

-Did the chalk help you? -She asked her brother.

He nodded. They remained silent, drinking some mates to calm their nerves and let time pass. The three of them were still in bedclothes. He in Norberto's robe, she in a white nightgown and a silk robe, her brother in striped pajamas.

-Why did Vicente come to see me, then? How could he risk letting everyone know about you...

"Vicente was a coward," said Norberto. Since he was a child he was afraid. He couldn't stand the pain, and after watching our grandparents and aunts die, he decided that he would do it with anesthesia. That's why we had to accompany him to the hospital, after all he was our brother.

Ruiz remembered the first consultations, the kind optimism that he had tried to instill in him so that he would not worry about those supposed intestinal cysts. He used to go alone, looking back before entering the office, as if he were afraid of being followed or someone seeing him doing what he shouldn't.

-The people at the hospital already know this, Ruiz. At least those who were in the operating room with you. They are ours.

-But how many are there, then?

They smiled, but the screams interrupted every gesture that was not solemn.

"It's impossible for us to know, dear," she answered, caressing his cheek. Thousands, millions, maybe.

She looked at her brother for approval. Norberto nodded.

The hands of the clock on the kitchen wall advanced slowly, marking first eight, then nine and ten in the morning. Almost at noon, the three of them were already dressed and were walking around the house not knowing what to do to distract themselves from the old man's screams. Every time one of the brothers entered the room with the chalk, the screams would subside for a while, but then they would increase again, sometimes louder.

The three sat in the living room. Norberto in a single armchair, Natalia and Bernardo holding hands on a large sofa.

"How much longer is it going to last?" Ruiz asked.

-There are no rules for this. You must understand, Ruiz. It is a natural process, you as a doctor must understand it. How long does labor last from the start of contractions? Is there a set time? This is the same. They are born when we die, but are they born because we die, or do we die because they are born?

-They do not know? Are they your race and don't know it?

-Do you, doctor, who has read about the human body and about men in general, do you know the reason for life, why we were born to leave not long after? Furthermore, you are wrong if you think of us as another race. We are humans, that's why they populate us. We are one more habitat, an environment to fulfill the process of their lives.

They looked at the door of the old man's room, there was a knock. Natalia got up from the couch.

-Don't go! -Her brother warned her. Why don't you go, Ruiz? Take him the chalk and see him, talk to him if you can.

But there was no time to respond. A crash of falling objects came from inside the room and a long, deep scream tore the stability of the air inside the house, splitting the midday light into two unrecognizable fragments. A before and after of the time lapse cut with a sound knife was established forever in the middle of the hallway, and there they would continue to pass throughout the afternoon and night, until finally the screams were silenced and the space without time in front of the door was traveled by those who live in the bowels.

The two brothers ran to the door, but Norberto arrived and entered before her. Natalia knocked on the door and said:

-Alright? What happened?

But they didn't answer him. Ruiz tried to push her away from the hallway. She did not resist, as she cried again with her head resting on Bernardo's chest. It was the first time he had seen her so insecure and scared, she didn't seem like the same woman who had been singing so

confidently and proudly the night before, and who had held him while they toured the freak stands at the fair.

Norberto came out.

-Nothing happened, he wanted to get up and fell out of bed. But at least the scare was of some use, now he's sleeping.

Norberto sighed deeply. He looked exhausted, but he didn't want to stop caring for his father.

-Why don't they go out? "Go to lunch in town," he said, and looking at Ruiz, he added: "Take her, distract her a little, please."

Bernardo agreed. Natalia was going to do what her brother told her, but first she kissed him on the cheek and went to her room to change.

Norberto rested his hands on Ruiz's shoulders. He started to tear up.

-Thank you for being here to help us. You're going to be my brother from now on. Sometimes I feel like I can't do it alone, I'm also afraid, but another young man in the family is a great help to resist.

He hugged Ruiz, and he felt stunned. When he was ready to hug him too, Norberto had already separated and told him to take the entire afternoon off. He would take care of the old man until they returned. There was no need to worry about him dying while they were away, the process, he assured, was going to take a long time.

Then Ruiz and Natalia got into the jeep and took the road to town. In the plaza, they were raising the floorboards and several women were sweeping the sidewalks. There were remains of papers, plastic cups, broken bottles. Some dogs were nibbling on some peeled bones from the roast. They walked through the square exchanging greetings with some neighbors. In front was Aranguren, sitting in the same place and position where he had seen him on Friday. Ruiz greeted him and they crossed the street.

-How are you, doctor?

-Fine, thanks.

Aranguren did not look at Natalia, nor did she speak to him.

"I'm going to the bakery, dear, I'll wait for you there," she said.

Ruiz nodded, and as he watched her walk away from her, Aranguren told him:

-You see we don't get along well. Old family feuds, dear doctor. And now that it seems that you are going to be part of the family...I couldn't help but see them holding hands, excuse me...I don't know if you will continue to visit me.

-I would like to know the reason for the problem. I don't think they want to tell me, that's why I'm asking you.

-Look, doctor. We have fought over labor interests, we could say. We have common areas of dominion, and although with different means, our goal is common. The Larriere family is representative of a way of dying, invasive and bestial, disgusting in my opinion. The other families, to which I belong, are dedicated to distributing other forms of death, the plague, for example, rats and their tunnels. Understands? We are not invaders, we are messengers. They, on the other hand, carry death within their bodies, we simply distribute it.

Ruiz looked towards the cemetery while he listened to Aranguren's story. He had seen a movement like sea waves, but he realized it was the golden reflection of the sun on the bushes.

-Let's go in, doctor. I'll treat you to something fresh. Do you like appetizers?

Ruiz answered yes and followed him. Once inside, he heard music coming from a record player in the corner. It was Verdi's Va pensiero, and he thought about his dream that night.

-You like opera, don't you, doctor?

Ruiz thought of Renato Tejada, the man he had considered his father-in-law until so recently before. He must also have been listening to that choir at that moment in the Buenos Aires department, he could assure that.

Aranguren brought two tall glasses and poured a measure of Fernet for each, then diluted it with soda and lifted the glass from it.

-To your health, doctor.

Ruiz looked at the old man's abdomen. He was as swollen as Vicente's or Larriere's.

-Me too, doctor. Those of us who live in this town are exposed to them, my mother was and that is why I am forced to live here. If I return to my family, I will infect my people. To your health, doctor. Because he lives long.

Ruiz raised his glass and toasted.

Through the side window you could see only part of a garden of manicured grass, with bushes drawing a labyrinth. Very close to the window, some boys were playing chase. Their laughter could be heard clear and happy, but Ruiz thought he heard some insults that did not coincide with those laughter. He got up to look. More than ten meters away there was a bundle lying on the grass. It looked like a package of garbage, wrapped in a burlap bag. But he moved, as if zigzagging, then rolling in places. Then Ruiz

recognized one of the cocoons that the night before was wrapped in spider webs.

The children had come up and were insulting him. They ran around, jumping and mocking with foul words that were grotesque in their mouths. Ruiz was not prissy nor too conservative, but he felt that these kids were repeating taught words, as if someone had told them that if they encountered beings like that, they should act and say what they were saying, even without knowing what it meant.

Then they dispersed, and Ruiz thought they would leave him alone, but they returned with branches and sticks. They began to hit him hard, and it seemed to him that they enjoyed it, that they had known all along the true meaning of his insults. They were no longer children, because they looked like the men they would become, men who knew that they, like that cocoon in his shroud of spider webs, would one day die.

The sticks fell and rose as the body in the cocoon shook and shuddered with each blow. A hum or a moan could be heard above the screams of the boys.

Ruiz left the glass on the table and headed for the door. Aranguren stopped him by one arm.

-No, doctor. Let them play, that's how the kids are entertained here.

But he freed himself from the hand that held him and went out. He walked around the corner of the building and entered the garden. He saw that several dogs were now biting the cocoon, fighting for the prey. The boys, upon seeing him coming, stopped hitting and waited for him to come closer. They didn't seem to fear him, perhaps they didn't even expect him to challenge them, they must have imagined that he wanted to join them. But when he grabbed a branch from the ground and began to threaten them, they moved away. Then he shooed the dogs away long enough to kneel next to the cocoon. He broke a part of the cobwebs that covered the man's head, saw the eyes open and covered with a transparent coating of secretions that smelled horribly. He carried the body in his arms and walked towards the square, looking back at the boys who followed him, at the dogs who barked at him, at Aranguren who tried to stop him, at many people who looked at him in surprise.

He hadn't planned this, he didn't even know why he was doing it. He was only sure of his actions, of the reflection of his body that he had reacted as quickly as when he was on duty at the hospital and had to save someone's life.

He had already crossed almost the entire square when he found himself in front of Natalia. She looked at him very seriously.

-What are you doing?

-They were killing him...I can't leave him here.

He didn't stop when he answered, he continued walking to the jeep while she grabbed him by his clothes, demanding that he stop.

-You don't understand, Bernardo. So he must die...

-Not like that...no one has to die like that.

He left the body in the back of the jeep and climbed into the driver's seat.

-Come on...

She hesitated, while the neighbors looked at them. The dogs barked and one dared to jump onto the jeep and bite the body. Ruiz took off and the animal fell to the ground. People moved out of their way, Natalia gave them a look that seemed to ask for forgiveness. She rubbed her face nervously and said:

-I thought you understood...

-Understand what? This town is sick and I am going to try to cure it. I don't know what I've been thinking about all these days. As if I had lived in a dream and only now I wake up to see that it is real.

-A reality that you are not going to change at all. I assure.

They arrived at the room. He carried the body to the warehouse and protected it with blankets. Natalia let him do it without saying anything, then she turned to enter the house. Ruiz tried to remove the rest of the cobwebs, but they seemed to form again as he removed layer after layer. He finally gave up, and after making sure that the man was breathing, he left him there, locking the door.

In the house he found the two brothers talking. She should have told Norberto what he had done.

"What were you hoping to achieve, Bernardo?" said Norberto.

-Don't know. Maybe you guys tell me.

-You surprise me. You left a few hours ago being one person and you return being another.

-When I saw the boys and the dogs destroying the man, I couldn't sit still. If they had left him alone, going through his cycle, it would have come naturally to me, but not in the way they were attacking him.

-And what difference does it make if we do it when you've already seen how they use us? They have no mercy for us.

-But he is a man...

-He will soon cease to be.

Ruiz sat down. He was becoming more and more confused, and he was beginning to feel all the despair that he had left behind those days. But now he turned around and saw that this despair was a mountain that threatened not to crush him, but to climb into his chest and drown him.

He started to cry. Natalia knelt next to him and kissed him. Her kisses were sweet, and he would have given her soul to her, if he had asked her at that moment.

"A while ago," said Norberto, "I asked you to help me resist, and now you are making Natalia suffer even more."

Mercy, Ruiz told himself. Should I feel pity for them? He heard the old man's screams again. Natalia cried for her and he hugged her tightly. It was getting dark outside and they had already been enduring those screams for more than ten hours.

-I'm going to go in and talk to him. Maybe I can understand what I have to do.

The brothers agreed.

-But call us to say goodbye, if you see that...

He said yes and entered the hallway. He stood in front of the door, rapped with his knuckles, opened the door and peeked out. The room was dark. The curtains swayed in the open window in the breeze. He saw the bed and the old man's body lying there. He closed the door.

He heard the moans, the movements of his body rolling over the crumpled sheets. Larriere was covered only in long cotton underwear. The sweat made his face and torso shine with straight, white hair. He turned from side to side in bed, and from time to time he clutched his belly as if attacked by an unbearable spasm. It was then that he screamed louder, and then he calmed down little by little, until he was lying on his back again, opening his arms in a cross.

"Sir," said Ruiz.

Larriere opened his eyes.

-Son...

-I am Dr. Ruiz, sir...

-I know, that's why I call you son. At least my son-in-law...

Ruiz wasn't so sure things would happen that way, but he didn't want to contradict him.

-Do you need company?

-Yes, let's talk before they attack me again.

Ruiz sat on the bed and saw the extremely bulging belly, even more than the one he had seen on Vicente.

-Don't make my Natalia suffer...

-Mr. Larriere, I am not so sure that we will get married...

-I am. There is no way you can avoid it. You are one of us.

Ruiz smiled, he thought he was listening to a child whose parents were about to separate.

-I'm not like you...

The old man grabbed his hand and squeezed it tightly, as if it would contain all the pain he must be feeling again. Then he relaxed a little, and said:

-You had a puncture in the operating room. That's how they told me.

Bernardo remembered.

-And several insects climbed onto your face, and touched your lips.

That was also very present in his memory.

-They entered, Bernardo, my son. Do not hesitate.

And the memory of his skin rescued the chill he had felt that time, the repulsion and nausea.

-I assure you to God that this time you are wrong...

-I'm not wrong, even if God existed.

Ruiz began to walk around the room. He tripped over things that had fallen that afternoon when the old man tried to get up. He clutched his head in his hands and repeated over and over again that it couldn't be true. He wasn't going to die like them.

-When my death is behind you, you will get used to forgetting for a while. You are going to live your life like anyone else. But in times like this, you will be different from the rest.

-But there has to be some way to cure me!

-I don't know her, only they could tell you. It never occurred to me to ask. I was taught to accept this fate like any other form of death.

-How do I ask them?

-There are many more than us, they can never populate us enough for everyone to survive. Some have adapted to growing outside of humans. They grow and transform. They look like men, but they are insects. Just the opposite of us.

The old man's voice had been drowned out once again in another attack. It was admirable the way he restrained himself from disturbing his family more than necessary. Ruiz grabbed his hands and helped him restrain himself.

-Endurance. Come on, hold on a little longer...

The old man nodded his head until he felt relief again.

-But where are they...?

-Not even I would recognize them. They use closed and abandoned places, such as old sheds near humid places.

-But where...?

-Those who saw them have told me that in the warehouses of the Buenos Aires docks.

So Ruiz already knew what to do. He would take the cocoon to the city, along with the others. And he would see the transformation. If everything the old man said turned out to be true, he had no choice but to kill himself.

Larriere screamed so loudly this time that his voice broke and disappeared into the silence, but in the darkness illuminated only by the dim evening light coming through the window, he felt a multitude of insects invading the bed. The old man's belly had finally opened like a dry shell, and beetles and spiders were pouring out.

Ruiz wanted to escape towards the door but the floor was already covered in insects, and they were beginning to climb the walls. They were crawling up his legs and he tried in vain to get them off of him. He ejected hundreds and many more climbed back in. He screamed for help, heard a knock on the door. He remembered that he had locked the door handle when he closed it, so he fought back his nausea and went to open it. When he opened , the insects seeped like water through the opening. The two brothers were waiting for him in the hallway.

Natalia grabbed his hand. Norberto closed the door again. The three ran out of the house and stood in the garden, agitated, silent and waiting. Then they saw waves of insects coming out of the windows and doors. Spiders with long, thin legs that quickly formed webs on the ceilings and walls. Beetles whose pincers adhered to the wood of furniture and doors and began to eat them away. The lamps went out, and the house seemed like a

great cave where insects formed their nests, created their offspring, and spread out to invade the world.

That night they would sleep at a neighbor's house. Ruiz followed the brothers, who were walking together in front of him, arm in arm. Natalia had wanted to walk next to him, but Ruiz refused to touch any member of that family again. He let them continue walking. Norberto turned around from time to time to see if he was following them; he no longer had that kind look that he had always given him, but rather a furious expression. It was true that he had lost his brother and his father in less than a week, and that now he was left solely responsible for the family and the businesses. But Ruiz sensed that there was more than all that, the disappointment that he was not what the other expected.

Ruiz stopped in the middle of the dirt road, he heard that the brothers' footsteps had also stopped. He began to run back towards the house, while Norberto called him and ran behind. He soon caught up to him and grabbed his arm.

-Where are you going?

-To pick up my car to go back to the city.

-You're a poor idiot, and I thought you had more courage than Vicente.

He didn't wait for a response, he punched her in the jaw and went to where he had left Natalia. Ruiz rubbed his mouth, tasted blood on a pair of loose teeth, and walked home. He was not going to go in, but he told himself that the shed should not be occupied by insects. He unbolted the door and saw that the cunt was still there. He took down some blankets that were reserved for the mounts and lay down on the floor.

He fell asleep immediately, because the blow had numbed him, anesthetizing his face and his senses already dulled by the fatigue of that whole day of being awake. Then he returned to the dream, to the field of his dream where the ground was made up of beetles, the sky darkened by locusts that never stopped passing by, and a single tree in that entire area.

The spider tree.

He could hear the buzzing of the locusts, and the constant crackling of the beetles. He turned his head toward the house. A woman came out of the door and started walking towards where he was.

It was Cecilia's body reconstructed by her surgeon's hands, but as she got closer she saw that she did not have her head, but rather carried it under her left arm, like a helmet. He had forgotten to put it on before the music caught her attention. She, surely, came to complain about that carelessness.

He was walking along a path that was impossible to differentiate from the rest of the field; everything was a flat, crackling surface that moved continuously and slowly. He didn't move from his spot next to the tree. When Cecilia was a meter away from him, her head told him:

-Please, doctor, finish your work.

Then he raised her arms and two spider legs extended needles and thread to her. Two others came down from the branches and perched on Cecilia's shoulders. Ruiz began basting her needles, telling her to rest his head on her neck, and began sewing. Spiders circled her neck and over her shoulders, her legs working faster than a surgeon's hands. They came and went, they walked over his back and chest, but theirs was only work. They had woven a cloth that descended from the branches and new members of that community of weavers went up and down there. Ruiz thanked them for their help, without stopping to look at the points that he was giving with extreme care.

Finally his head was sewn to the rest of the body. Cecilia tested her new state by turning or tilting her head from side to side. She seemed happy to be able to see so much with her just moving her head a little. She smiled, but she suddenly felt a pain that made her kneel.

"My leg," she said.

Ruiz realized that her left leg had come off and was lying on the floor.

-Sew it, doctor, please.

But he knew he couldn't do it. His hands had lost their ability in those seconds, as if they had been born to reconstruct Cecilia just once.

"I can't," he answered.

She looked at him with sadness and a certain resentment.

-But your hands...- she said, while she tried to get up holding on to Ruiz's hands-... your hands have the poetry of a spider.

She He carried it in his arms and waited, he didn't know what.

A bus appeared on the route. It didn't raise dust like the first time, but waves of dead beetles. The locusts formed a halo around them, entering and leaving through the windows.

The bus stopped next to the tree. He went up with Cecilia and left her in a seat. It was dark inside, because it was time for the last service. The driver looked at him, but he didn't know how to answer because he didn't speak the language of insects. He looked at the rest of the passengers, they were thin and long-limbed, they seemed to suffer in those narrow seats. His eyes

were large and looked not at him, but at the locusts that were invading the interior, leaving a sticky green coating everywhere.

He got off the bus and watched him leave along the same path. A dog appeared from under the chassis and approached Ruiz. He was white, of robust build, not very tall, without ears, and seemed blind, because he barely opened his eyelids, raising his head and sniffing the air. He soon seemed to get his bearings and ran after the bus. They both disappeared between the green clouds and the black ground.

The poetry of a spider, she had told him. But he didn't know if that was a merit or an insult. Cecilia had always been open to elegant and sharp irony, subtle and cruel at the same time. He knew that now his mind was being opened as if with a very sharp scalpel, because those words were weapons more effective than anything invented by man. And who had given language to the human being, had he created it himself or had it been given to him by God?

A god who makes his creatures with a manual, a built-in code, a system of signs that they must unravel slowly, parsimoniously and obsessively throughout their lives, only to discover a phrase at the end of the path, perhaps a single word that they will not read, that they won't even listen. The memory of an echo, a riddle, a premonition.

The only certainty, that of the dream.

Ruiz got naked. His soles stepped on the membranous surface of the insects, he squeezed in his hands the locusts that were passing around him at that moment. His hands and feet were covered with the substance that made up those creatures. He then leaned against the trunk and began to climb, clinging to the bark.

And as he ascended towards the high and wide crown of the tree, first some and then many legs of large and strong spiders appeared from the branches to help him, attentive to his progress, watching that he did not fall, taking care of him as if he were one of their members. , perhaps the most important, and was returning home.

6

He woke up pushed, pulled on his clothes, his face covered in hair and saliva. He heard in his dreams the barking of the dogs, and then he opened his eyes to reality as he had opened his ears a little before. At least to the reality of that town in which he had run aground like a shipwrecked man following a funeral ship.

He was next to the cocoon that the dogs had begun to destroy after entering through the door that he had carelessly left open. He didn't even remember if he'd at least half-closed it, so tired was he last night.

He stood up to separate himself from the pack that was pulling the flesh of the man wrapped in spider webs, but little of the webs remained, and of the flesh there were only torn shreds. There were five or six dogs, some had taken pieces to the corners of the shed, others insisted on tearing out what was left. He must have known that sooner or later this is how it would all end. Natalia was right. She couldn't go against nature. He had always been stubborn in revealing himself, in extirpating and combating what life insisted on deforming or mistreating. But the smell of blood is always the acrid and severe smell of blood, the ultimate goal of the attentive sense of smell, of the sensitive power of penetration of the senses of every carnivorous species in the world.

Men or dogs, the scent of blood always satisfies.

He stood up and backed towards the door, watching out for the dogs to follow him. He opened the door a little more and the morning light illuminated the interior. The dogs, crouching over the fragments of his kill, raised their heads and looked at him, but he realized that they did not see him. They were blind, white dogs, with short hair, a robust body and not very tall, with short tails, which were now erect and very tense, and without ears, only a hole on both sides of the thick head and wide snout.

Ruiz left quickly and closed the door with the outside bar. He looked towards the house. There were people coming and going, workers carrying buckets and brushes. He saw Natalia wearing a cleaning apron and her hair tied up, covering her head with a red scarf. She greeted him and he walked towards her, crestfallen, exhausted and hungry. His clothes were sweaty and he smelled horribly of saliva.

She went to meet her and hugged him.

-You look terrible, dear. do. You have to take a bath before having breakfast.

"I'm leaving..." he interrupted her. He did not want to see or hear her, because that meant giving in, being defeated and forced to stay.

She looked at him without releasing his arms from her neck, without releasing her body pressed against his.

-You're scared because of last night, but it's over. Better times are coming, my love. It was a time of bad luck, as they say. Now the three of us remain, and we are young.

-I have a life in Buenos Aires. A job I can't leave...

-Okay, but you can go and come back. It's a two-hour trip, just...

-Listen to me please. I don't know if I want to go back to you...

Natalia sat in the wicker chair where they used to spend the afternoon looking at the countryside.

-Dear, those of us who are different only have a chance with those who are different. If not, what are we left with...

-That's what I have to find out. I'm not sure if there is a place where I can continue living. First I have to know if I am one of you or not.

-And how do you plan to find out? Doing your blessed blood tests?

Her irony had no place in her, because she lacked Cecilia's cynicism. In Natalia those words were cruel in themselves, lacking all elegance and subtlety. Her beauty was deformed, it shadowed her face and her voice, sweet and dark, became harsh and dead.

Ruiz did not respond. He went to his car, which had been parked since Friday next to the front door. He headed back toward the road. He did not look back, although he knew that the dust hid the room and the solitary figure of Natalia sitting in that chair, watching him leave, move away, like a tear.

He felt something flying over the car, while he drove along the same dirt road whose sides were lined with abandoned buildings. The same children and the same dogs watched him pass, but this time, curiously, they did not leave, but entered their ruined houses. As if he were the protagonist of a movie whose tape was being rewinded.

That shadow, however, accompanied him. He looked at the sky through the windshield. Something was passing above him, birds, perhaps, but it seemed to him that he hadn't seen one in so long that he wasn't sure he recognized them anymore. And he was afraid, suddenly he was terrified of seeing a bird hovering around him, hearing its hungry squawking, and he told himself, out loud, that from now on he had to take care of them. This thought did not surprise him in the least, it was natural, spontaneous, but that did not stop him from feeling it like an irrevocable sentence.

He reached the route and headed towards Buenos Aires. He had the sensation of having been away from the world for a week, and now that he saw the road and other cars like his, other houses and the invariable bridges over the canals or rivers of the province, he wondered if he had not dreamed everything that had happened. Except for Cecilia's death, which was exactly one week ago today. Because she had died on a Monday night in an apartment with a man who the police said she knew from high school. She died of a cocaine overdose.

"You have the poetry of a spider," she had told him when he woke up from anesthesia after the amputation, while she was changing his bandages. She had bled a lot and the bed was soaked in blood.

"How?" He asked, without even looking at her, intent on controlling her bleeding.

-You are like spiders, dear. Soft but rough, innocent but full of horror.

He looked at her, then, and a lump formed in her throat. Her lower lip trembled, so he set about continuing to heal her, applying gauze and bandages, wrapping her stump with new cloth.

It was around this time that he got her used to anxiolytics, then antidepressants. And every morning, before saying goodbye to her to go to the hospital, he left the pills on the nightstand with the exact indication of when he should take them. Then she began to regulate them herself, and a few months later he believed she had abandoned them. But soon came the time of resentment and sadness that neither of them knew how to face, and one day she decided to leave.

He should kill me, Ruiz said out loud, looking at each car coming in the opposite direction like a gun fired at himself. But why kill another innocent person? He would have to drive towards the railing of a bridge and accelerate until he fell into the river. But if it was all a dream, if that town was a nightmare caused by Cecilia's death? He knew better. If I am infected, if I am one of them, I must end my life. He realized that the only thing he would accomplish with that would be to spread his spawn ahead of time. He imagined the car overturned and him split in two, while the insects spread across the road and the countryside, flooding the segment of the world hitherto free of the plague.

He opened the windows and took a deep breath of the humid air. that Monday morning. She should have called Renato before leaving. He stopped at a gas station. She left the car to fill the tank and went inside to have a drink. It was ten o'clock and she hadn't had breakfast yet. He was dirty and the employees looked at him suspiciously. He washed himself in the bathroom sink as best he could. He returned to the cafeteria and ordered a latte. Then he called the department, but no one answered. It was strange that Renato was not home at that time. He had a bad feeling, he couldn't help but feel bad for leaving him alone for so long, right after the death of his daughter. How could I leave like that, he reproached himself, leaving everything behind to spend those days in a place that looked more like a spider's nest than a town.

He sat down again and the pump employee came in to tell him that the car was ready. Before getting into the car, he read the sign prohibiting smoking. As if he had never seen it before, as if it were addressed to him especially.

Cigarettes and fuel.

"Excuse me, I forgot to ask you to fill a drum for me, in case I get on the road," he told the employee.

He opened the trunk and took out a plastic drum. While he waited for it to be filled, Ruiz returned to the cafeteria and bought a pack of cigarettes and a pack of matches. He returned to the car, paid the bill, got in and headed back on the road. He now had a plan: get to an open field, spray the car and his own body with gasoline and light a cigarette. Insects couldn't survive the fire, nothing does except stones, and even they are stained.

He crossed the Chascomús lagoon. He saw a bend to the right, with a series of lonely trees whose branches moved in the breeze. He turned there and stopped the car. He took the can out of the trunk and opened the lid. He smelled the pungent aroma of fuel, and suddenly he was afraid of the irreversible. What if he was not infected? Why end his life, which he ultimately loved despite everything.

He had to make sure that what the old man had said was true before killing himself. He heard some trills and a flock of sparrows came out of those trees and resumed their flight towards the south. They weren't chasing him, they hadn't even flown over him, and that made him feel better. Paranoia, he told himself. Then he started the car again, threw the cigarettes out the window, but kept the matches in the glove compartment.

When he arrived in Buenos Aires, he felt that he was returning to his home. The streets whose noise he had come to hate, even the incessant traffic that suffocated him, were now unmistakable signs that he was on the right path to the place he had been destined to live. Not the countryside or the dead silence of those nights where there was only darkness and terrifying nothingness before his eyes. Where even the chirping of crickets seemed a call more distant than eternity itself. Here, however, the noises and lights had a reason and a cause, something palpable that limited the explanations to what was clear and simple.

Simple and clear. That was an essential question to survive. Discard the complex to move forward. Leave the bundles of earth behind, abandon them as one abandons the dead, and continue along the path forgetting that one also is and will be earth at some point. Because the mind knows how to fly, it must exercise that power to lift the body that insists on adhering to the earth as if it carried in its belly thousands of insects that insist on returning to the humus, to the always fertile black earth that engenders the creatures that kill to feed.

That is why the city, the cement and the asphalt were not a sacrament of slaves but a host of freedom, because only from the gap in the streets between two tall buildings can the narrow strip of sky peeking out between them be appreciated and loved. What merit can there be in loving a sky that is there day and night, crushing us, making us remember that the earth is

the only way to escape from it. God and heaven, presses that use vertigo as a trap, weapons to intimidate us, to put one foot on the back of our necks and rub our faces against the ground.

He parked the car next to the curb of the old and beloved apartment building where he had lived for almost ten years. The doorman greeted him kindly, giving him the condolences that he had not had the opportunity to offer before.

"How is Renato?" he asked.

-I saw him yesterday, he was fine, but a little sad, as you can understand.

Ruiz was relieved. He took the elevator and entered the apartment. The blinds were closed, but the bathroom light was on and the shower was running. Renato was taking a bath, he said to himself, I'm going to prepare breakfast for him in the meantime.

He turned on the stove, heated water for coffee and mate. He took jam and butter out of the refrigerator. He spread several pieces of toast and put them on a plate. He waited. The water continued to flow. He went to the bathroom door and knocked:

-Renato, it's me, I just got back. I made him breakfast. He received no response. She opened the door ajar. The steam barely showed the foggy medicine cabinet mirror and the towel hanging from the shower curtain rod.

-Renato, is he okay?

Nothing but water answered him. She closed the curtain and saw Renato's body lying in the bathtub, face down, his right leg twisted and broken. She took him out of the bathtub and picked him up in her arms. She took the naked body to his room and laid him on the bed. She looked for a pulse, placed her ear on the old man's chest. It was still warm. He tried cardiac massage and artificial respiration. He looked for his briefcase, looked for the blisters, but he was nervous like an inexperienced person and couldn't control his trembling. He finally sat up in bed and told himself that there was no point in trying anything anymore. The old man was white, he must have been dead for several hours. Only the hot water had kept his body warm.

"My God," he said in a low voice, looking at the closed eyes of that man that he had not only entrusted with his daughter, but had also given him her life to take care of him in his old age.

And he had wreaked havoc with both of them.

He covered the body with the quilt and left the room. He mechanically went to the bathroom and turned off the shower. He threw some towels on the floor to dry him a little. He went to his study and found it as he had left

it, the anatomy books on the desk, the table lamp still on. He put the books back on the shelf, turned off the light and raised the blinds. The afternoon sun came in strong and overwhelming, not as light, but as a solid force similar to a legion of barbarians advancing, always advancing through the deserted steppe of a distant country. This is how the city that he contemplated through the window seemed to him now, the home that a while before he had thought he had found again had already lost meaning, because whoever made up that home would no longer wait for him again.

An apartment is air between four walls, it is books and furniture, but a life that awaits the arrival of another is the essence, the definition, the indivisible unit that constitutes a home.

He had destroyed it.

He went to the kitchen and turned on the gas. God, he said to himself, I'm looking too much like a soap opera actress. What do I intend to do, he asked himself, turning the keys back on. The idea of suicide returned again and again, and yet the root that feeds the tree of logic insisted on bringing the virgin and refreshing sap to his confused mind. If I have created so much disaster, I thought, why do I still want to continue living. Then he felt sorry for the desperate human spirit that always wants to survive despite everything, then he felt contempt, and later he believed it necessary to show him hatred, but he couldn't. He loved his body as he loved the eyes that saw the light of day. He hated pain, and that was why he had tried to combat it throughout his life and with his profession as a firearm and instrument of remodeling. Remove what is no longer useful and shape the gap. And yet in that void, in those wounds, the larvae always struggled to emerge, and the flies insisted on landing to lay their eggs.

There are no white voids, only dark ones, because void is depth, up or down, but always and nothing more than a perpetual sinking where light does not penetrate.

He should have known before killing himself. Check what Larriere had told him. If they really existed, if they were walking among the rest of the world, there was nothing he could do but hide and remain silent. If he was one of them, then he would have to end his life. The way would be decided later.

Larriere had mentioned that they were hiding in damp, abandoned places. He mentioned the port docks. There he would go then. He looked at the clock, it was three in the afternoon. He had to do something with Renato's body, but he couldn't wait. He could not, in reality, endure the wait of the funeral home employees, preparing the papers, waiting for the hours of wake and burial. He was not willing to tolerate even a single repetition of that rite that he had witnessed less than a week before.

He left the apartment and went down to the street. He got into the car and drove off without looking anything other than ahead, looking at the

windshield and thinking about which street he should take to get there faster. He walked several blocks, took Rivadavia Avenue, then turned left on Gascón, took Corrientes and continued straight to the port.

When he arrived at the dock area, he encountered customs barriers, traffic and people coming and going from the administrative buildings. The sky was clear and the sun reflected on the river. Several anchored ships were indications that they could be there, among those rusty iron rubble, suitable places for their growth. As a boy he had visited the port of La Boca with his parents. They were driving along the waterfront, and he looked out the window to look at the cobblestones that he had seen. They walked to the edge of the water, which smelled very bad, but it was the aroma of the port, according to the abandoned and ruined ships, vestiges of long and remote voyages across immense oceans from distant and ancient Europe.

There they must have been growing, developing with the humidity of the night and the dew of the morning like a cradle born in the shadows. The insects in the morning sun, dispersing among the cobblestones, mixing among the stones and garbage, thus assimilated into the environment, mutually mimicking each other, the city and the insects. They are born from the earth, it is true, but cement and steel offer them nooks and crannies that they could hardly find in the countryside. Just as man feels vertigo from emptiness, they flee from large spaces. We all need a roof to hide us from the searching gaze of God. And they have their gods, too. Ruiz had begun to sense it.

The dream, he told himself, is like the promise of a paradise.

He walked several blocks, until he decided to wait the night in a bar near Luna Park. It was an old place, neglected despite its proximity to the city center. It had two stained glass windows on the sides of the entrance, with metal blinds raised a little more than halfway, hiding the name. The tables were made of dark wood, painted, and the chairs were uncomfortable and hard, some with old green fabric cushions. He sat by the window, moved away the ashtray, the salt shaker, and the sugar jar, and rested his elbows on it. He ordered a double coffee, it was brought to him in a cup with a broken handle. There were no paper napkins and he went to get some from the next table.

-May I? -He said to the man who was reading the newspaper.

The other looked up and nodded. Ruiz stayed for a few seconds looking into his eyes. Then he apologized and returned to his table. He had not seen anything strange, but he realized that he was looking for signs, alterations in reality that would confirm what he had been thinking for a long time: that he was going crazy, or that the world was opening up to reality. eyes of him. And perhaps, he thought, both things were two sides of the same thing.

A tall, lanky woman entered, with dark, straight elbow-length hair, wearing a white raincoat, black boots, and a leather purse. She had her

hands in her pockets. When she sat next to the other wall of the bar and rested her hands on the table, Ruiz saw that she had long fingers and her nails were painted jet black. So similar to one of those spiders that hang from the beams in houses or sheds with high ceilings, hidden in the darkness, quiet because men do not usually look up when there is a roof that protects them.

Later a fat man arrived, wearing a brown suit, matching tie and white shirt. He had tortoiseshell glasses with thick lenses that deformed his eyes. He was almost bald, except for the crescent of hair on the back of his neck and above his ears. He sat right in front of Ruiz. He heard the reedy voice asking for a coffee and three crescents of butter. When they served it, the man began to eat voraciously, dipping the crescent into the coffee and putting it almost entirely in his mouth. The sleeves of the shirt showed the black hair on the back of his hands and wrists, so Ruiz imagined that this was how his entire body must be, black and dark, where the thick hair formed a crust similar to the shells of beetles. .

And so he analyzed each man, woman or child who entered or left the bar, finding in all of them some sign, well marked or barely perceptible, that he belonged to the race of those he had left in the town. He looked at his wristwatch, it was seven in the afternoon. The customs office should have already been closed, and surveillance minimal, if there was any in those abandoned warehouses. He knew from the newspapers that the city government had planned to remodel them, promote improvements in the area, and sell the land to individuals. But for years the warehouses in the docks had remained closed, with the doors closed, surrounded by enormous boxes taken down from the ships, waiting months for customs approval or for the owners to come looking for them.

This is what he was thinking when he saw a man enter that he would not have mistaken for any other, as if Ruiz's eyesight had become an expert in distinguishing the signs of this new disease that he needed to diagnose not to eradicate it, but to leave it recorded in the books of history. the mind and the accounts of his soul that he felt guilty. The man had a bulging belly, like a misshapen and incongruous prominence with the rest of his body. He was short in stature, with narrow shoulders and a hunched back, but his abdomen was clearly visible under the linen shirt.

The man stopped at the door, looked inside, looking for a free table. Then he came in and sat down by the back wall. There were two free tables closer to the sidewalk, but he had chosen to sit in the closest place. dark, next to the door that led to the bathrooms and the bar's storage room. The waiter approached him. The man raised a hand with the sign of a coffee cut. That sign looked like the sign of the cross that priests make in the final blessing of the mass. Ruiz remembered that image from the last time he had entered a church, when he was a boy. Now the memory was a farewell, he felt it that way, something that returns from memory without force or feeling, something filtered by an error in the mechanism of wakefulness.

God was absent in that bar, because dust and old age do not need anything to exist, they are the stillness that sustains them, they are immobility and serene complacency. They are sufficient for themselves, and sometimes raise hosts, because his own form is capable of sheltering them without disturbing their growth, as any god would do with his creatures.

Old age and dust are the gods of insects. They are the father and mother of man's redeemers. Old age, sterile, breeds hosts; the dust, infertile, protects them.

Insects sustain the lives of men and take them away when they abandon them. Then they become men again, as all Christs are wont to do. Then they die and return to the bodies of men.

An evolutionary cycle.

And Ruiz, in that sign of the cross created in the air indicating a cup of coffee, made by the hands of a man who must, without a doubt, be one of them, discovered that he was beginning to believe in something for the first time. Not in health or illness, not even in anatomy, the only deity he thought he would trust for the rest of his life. But in a paradise that he had barely glimpsed in the dream of those last nights.

Ruiz was sweating, drops fell from his forehead. He wiped it with a paper napkin, and saw the bar's name printed on the paper.

“The ancient heart. Bar, Cafe. Minutes”

He looked up at the glass right next to him. Half hidden by the metal curtain, the lower part of the large green letters revealed the same name. And he thought he was dreaming again. It was not strange, in the middle of a dream, especially in those that occur in the last hours of the night, to tell oneself that one is in a dream, and when one thinks one wakes up one continues dreaming, telling oneself that it is a dream, and so it repeats itself. deception, or the perception of a deception that may simply be the dissolution of one framework into another, of sleep and wakefulness intermingling, confusing each other to make man a victim of the chaos in which both, sleep and wakefulness, usually live. There is no way to escape from a reality whose substrate is as volatile as the atoms of the air, which at one moment are water, and at the next, ice. Each one a dream of the other.

The man asked the waiter for the day's newspaper, he began to leaf through it carelessly, oblivious to the desperation that Ruiz was feeling and it made him sweat like a feverish person, moving his feet restlessly under the table. People were looking at him, but not the man he wanted to talk to. And what was he going to say to her then: excuse me, aren't you an insect? He had to wait, be patient. When he went out into the street, in the middle of the night, he would face him.

That's why he waited, calming himself with the passage of time marked by the old clock that hung on the wall and promoted a soft drink that had not existed for many years. He felt how the sweat under his armpits was drying with the cool of the night, and only a dry aroma of sweaty clothing remained. He put on the sweater he had left on the back of the chair. Then the man got up, went to the bathroom, returned five minutes later and went to the counter to pay for his drink.

Ruiz called the waiter to ask for the bill. The man walked past his table. He followed him with his eyes as he walked away down the path, he called the waiter again because he was taking a while. He paid quickly, without waiting for the change, and went out into the street looking for the man whose track he had lost. He stood with his hands on his head and a tearful expression on his face. A woman asked him if he was feeling okay. He looked at her blankly and ran to the corner, then he breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the other crossing the avenue towards the port.

The cars had stopped at the traffic light. Ruiz ran across because the yellow light was just turning. The man crossed the first bridge towards the dock area. Ruiz thought the man must be about to die. He would go there to leave his children. That's why the haggard look that he had noticed on her face, and despite that, resignation was a constant feature in all of them.

Have a coffee and read the newspaper of the day before you die.

But what Ruiz was looking for was the root of an all-too-known horror. Death from afar is an attractive monster, but ultimately a monster. Death, up close, is a swing where we swing higher and higher, higher, until the 360 turn degrees is a walk without vertigo, a chill down the spine and a merciful numbness of the will.

The man continued walking towards dock 7. There was no security, only a homeless man with his bags and two dogs that followed him. The man reached the entrance of the huge red brick warehouse, pushed the door and disappeared inside.

Ruiz followed him a block away. He came across the homeless man who asked him for alms. He gave him some coins and the other continued on his way. The dogs barked at a man on a bicycle, and the previous tense silence was made evident by the startle the barking produced. Only the noise of the traffic came now, muffled, and the horns sounded like crickets chirping in the distance. The river was silent like the field, dark on the surface and in the sky that covered it. The port was illuminated further north, but in that area the mercury lights were almost all out.

He reached the door and pushed. He didn't expect that they had closed it from the inside, who else would follow a man as anonymous and common as that. If I were one of them, Ruiz told himself, I would already be so accustomed to the idea of myself that I would think of everyone as my equals. I would not be followed by someone who does not suspect, but

rather someone who suspects himself as someone affected by the same circumstance. That is to say, I am the one who follows and whom one day someone else will follow.

He entered the shadow and closed the door, and suddenly he no longer seemed to be in Buenos Aires, but on the edge of a swamp, where the trees are so tall that they hide the light of the moon, and the humidity is so dense that it obstructs the passing of the sounds of the field and the cries of the beasts in the night. The moans came from nearby, from the dark depths of a place where there were no wells or swamps, but a cement floor that I couldn't see, but it was there. His feet were on concrete, but there was dirt and dust, even pieces of sandstone and rubble. A draft came from the high ceilings, and a rough trickle of heavy water flowed hard, making its way with difficulty between pipes and gutters. He heard a splash of water splashing his tongue, and he imagined the beings that must have been drinking.

He walked in that direction, without anyone stopping him, without hands or arms trying to grab him or push him towards the door. Not even a warning call, just a moan that gradually multiplied, not because it was just one at the beginning, but because his ears became accustomed to it just as his eyes become accustomed to the darkness. Then he sensed, knew, in fact, that there were many, perhaps dozens of them scattered on the ground, one next to the other, unknown to each other, each one given over to his own tragedy and his intimate pain. An equal pain in one and the other, but separated, unable to share it and therefore mitigate it or endure it.

Ruiz smelled the aroma of rot, the smell that arises from the mud accumulated under the stones, from stagnant water. He heard a buzzing noise that grew so quickly that he did not have time to protect his face, and the mosquitoes attacked him for a minute or two, but did not bite him. As if they had explored him and had verified that he was one of them, they left him alone and returned from where they had come, from the stagnant waters there in front of him, so close to him, and yet which he could not see.

He took other steps, hesitantly, stretching out his arms like a blind man, but now he was guided by his sense of smell, perceiving the aroma of the bodies that undoubtedly lay next to the shore that he had not yet reached.

He tripped over something. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the box of matches he had bought on the road. He lit one and the flame illuminated the space around him. There were bodies wrapped in cocoons, moving in zigzags, crawling in search of water. Some were like the one he had seen in the village, others still did not move, still and hard as dead beetles. But these were behind, in a line that continued with those who were moving, already mature and almost turned into men.

The flame went out and he lit another match, and then another, until he completed the patchwork panorama. The bodies along the walls were still

insects, but they were growing slowly. Further to the center were those who had acquired mobility and were trying to reach the water. Near the shore were the cocoons erect, extending their limbs, arms and legs that struggled against the fabric. He walked among them, watching as a naked man emerged from the cocoon and dropped again next to the rotten water, without opening his eyes, like a newborn but silent baby, covered in dried slime that was the remains of cobwebs.

He looked back, a lit match in his hand. He recognized the man he had followed, lying next to a wall, moaning in pain as his belly opened and let out new things. creatures that joined the others and stopped in a pile that grew rapidly, until settling in a continuous, slow flow, like the sewage in the city sewers. And the water they fed on came from there. Not from the river, so close, but from the dead water that returned to the river.

Then Ruiz thought of the town, at midday on Sunday, serene and stable like a paradise from which he had been expelled for refusing to believe.

All his life he had had no proof from God, only the pain and the useless struggle he had waged against him.

But there they were, the insects, searching for water and life, knowing that when they left that place, that field of moving soil awaited them, like black seas of beetles moving under a sky green with locusts towards a promised tree, of strong trunk and wide crown. The tree from which the spiders sprang that wove the framework that supported the world.

Ruiz knew, definitively, that he would not kill himself.

He left the place and walked back to the apartment, very late at night. He lay down next to Renato's body and fell asleep. This time he had no dreams.

When he woke up, he saw daylight coming through the cracks of the blind. He got up and opened the window. The light penetrated the room beautifully and serenely.

He went to the kitchen, put the water on and waited. He looked out into the hallway and saw two or three flies walking over the body.

He returned to the kitchen, put the water in the filter and the coffee began to fall into the cup. He carried her, smoking, to his study. He picked up the phone and dialed a number. He waited four rings, and when they answered, he said:

-Natalia, it's me. I'm back tonight.

Smiling, he hung up and walked to the bedroom door. He saw that the flies had completely covered the body and many more were flying around. And the more they entered, the denser the swarm became, the wider, until soon the entire room was taken over by them.

The wise flies, imperishable messengers and tireless merchants of death and resurrection.

THE REAPERS

1

I won't say which of us killed our father. But just as we share the blame, we share the work of burying it. It can be said that each of the three was the creator of an idea in the machinery we had invented. The machine that had to kill dad at the end of winter, so that spring would find us free from the yoke of its powerful weakness: the stubborn meekness of Don Pedro Espinoza to the earth, because just as she had him trapped hand and foot, he did it with us. As if blood were not the weakest bond, and he was obliged to respond with solicitous obedience to that nameless entity that human beings have decided to nickname with the striking and strange name of earth. Dirt is the ground we walk on and where crops grow, dirt is the habitat where we will lie for the eternity of time, as my mother says she has heard the town priest say. But I wonder if that black hand of clay that rises from consciousness can be called earth, tearing the membranes of the brain, breaking the bones of the skull and demanding submission from those it finds in its path. And these in turn feel obliged to hand over their property and belongings, their clothes and their animals, and when they are naked they go in search of their children and hand them over as well.

The earth entity is not a spectrum, it is a seed that flies with the wind that rises every afternoon in the fields, takes on golden hues at noon and is enveloped in ocher shadows in the afternoon. It smells of nothing when it is young, of rancid rot when it has died. The earth dies, too, and we have learned, thanks to our father, that the earth has an enemy. Not water, as narrow minds would say, not wind, as poetic spirits would think, but fire.

Our mother always knew, she was the connective link between the science of God, which she received from the priests every Sunday in every town we passed through, and my father. He found her justification in this kinship between her need and God's reasons.

Burn the fields to revive the land. Kill old vices so that new virtues are reborn. In every grain of dust he saw an opportunity, the seed of a house where he could settle permanently. The rain and hail prevented him, the prices of the crops and the large buyers settled his accounts to add to my father's bankruptcy. That's what I must call it, a breakdown, an imbalance, although everyone in the town had begun to call him a crazy nutter, and the commissioner, who so many times advised him to stop, told those who knew us that Don Pedro Espinoza was a criminal.

That is why today, on this September morning, the sun is barely rising, rising and fitting into the horizon like a harder stone. than a volcanic rock, the three of us: Raúl, Pedro and I are carrying our father's corpse towards the sunflower field. There, in that last madness, because nothing more than that was the dream he had of growing sunflowers after so many resounding failures, he would find his final home.

-Why would we have visited so many towns, if in the end the old man was going to end up in the only place he wanted? The land is the same everywhere.

My brothers looked at me. Raúl was twenty-five years old, Pedro twenty-one. I had just turned eighteen. Neither of them even seemed to attempt to respond to me. The three of us were in the cabin of the truck, rusty and dilapidated, which was more than twenty years old and which the old man had obtained four months before in exchange for the only two horses we had. The windshield was cracked and seemed to break a little more with each jump along the way. Raúl was driving, he had taken the truck without asking anyone. Pedro was on the other side of me, staring straight ahead, with his curly hair and thick mustache, both dark. I smelled the perspiration of old shirts, worn every day in the field for the last ten months, sowing the seeds of those sunflowers we were heading to.

"Now he's going to have somewhere to roll around comfortably," said Pedro.

Raúl gave him a short glance before returning to the road and saying:

-I don't want to hear anything else...

-Then tell Nicanor, who was the one who spoke first.

I was going to defend myself, but Raúl gave me a hard look, and then I saw the look of our father in his eyes. He was the one who looked most like him, the same height, the shape of his body, square with broad shoulders and strong arms, green, almost brown eyes, straight hair that was already beginning to thin, as precociously as Dad's, according to the old woman had told us. Already as a young man he had gone bald, she said, with only that aura of firm, black hair persisting, which never gave up. I remember seeing him with that sparse long hair sometimes, because he had no time but to plow, sow and cultivate for eighteen hours a day. He would come home from the field late at night, he would fall into bed and my mother would bring him food in a bowl and feed him in his mouth like a baby. Mainly soup, lots of hot vegetable, chicken and pork broth. Then we heard him get out of bed; The squeaking of my parents' mattress was characteristic, it served as an alarm clock in the morning, or it alerted us when mom or dad got up to challenge us for staying awake talking or doing what teenagers do when they discover that their bodies change.

My father took a bath after eating. My mother told him that he didn't do it right, but he had done it for forty years, and he was still alive, she told him. I could see his naked shadow from my bed, submerging himself in the large basin that we all used to bathe. That's why I say that Raúl is so similar to him, he even has the same arrangement of his chest hair, the same earthy coloring of his skin. Sometimes my father would fall asleep there, his arms dangling from the edges and his head slumped over one shoulder. Then we heard his snoring and we laughed. My mother challenged us to stay awake.

"Tomorrow you have to get up early," she said with a towel in her hands, then going to where he was. She put the towel aside, grabbed a towel and dried his head, gently waking him up.

"What time is it?" my father asked.

"The rooster hasn't crowed yet," she replied.

I was wondering why it wasn't more precise. What Dad needed to know was that he still had several hours of sleep left, and you can't fall asleep completely if you know that at any moment the rooster will crow. But women, I heard him say on occasions, have everything organized, so much so that they don't even realize how cruel they can be.

I could understand that even when he was little, watching Mom work from dawn to dusk every day for years, always with the same movements of her restless hands, never sitting down even to sew. Even on Sundays he maintained a routine that did not vary more than two or three times, perhaps. His silence was both encouraging and oppressive. She never raised her voice to challenge us, she simply said bluntly what she didn't like, and

then returned to that silence more illuminating than a blow or a spank on her back. Sometimes we would have preferred it.

-Did they say something to mom?

-You already know that we agreed not to tell him. "If this idiot didn't betray us..." Pedro said, looking at me.

"Nicanor is already a man," Raúl defended me. "That's why he is here." Otherwise, we would have left him with Clarisa and the old woman, sleeping.

"By now she must be awake, wondering where we went," Pedro said. She will think we abandoned her...

There was a hint of a smile on the three of us, as if this idea were so absurd that even our father's corpse could understand it. The body was in the back of the truck, wrapped in a blanket that Mom had knitted many years before. The same one with which the old man slept every winter night, naked or in his underwear, but protected by that wool that he had obtained after selling the harvest of two hectares of wheat.

Two hectares, and I laughed inside, because that was more than he had achieved in his entire life. I mean the land that was once owned and brought to fruition by him. Then, like so many times before I was born or could remember, all the land he cultivated was someone else's, after signing an agreement and an always humiliating percentage with the owner, forced to accept because he had a wife and four children to support.

I thought about our little sister, as the truck wobbled, jumping over the pebbles when Raúl couldn't avoid them. We had tied the body with an old rein that had been left in the shed after selling the horses. Then we put it in the truck. I say that I was thinking about Clarisa because when I left her in the morning before dawn, I passed in front of her bed and I thought she saw her awake. My parents' bed is the only one most hidden, but the four of us sleep in one room. Clarisa is already a woman, but she is not intimidated by sleeping so close to us. She is a girl with her head on straight, as mom says. She is getting married soon. She is fifteen years old but the old man had already agreed that she would get together with Lisandro, our neighbor's son. One less mouth to feed, and the three of us could now support ourselves. Maybe that's what led our father to grow sunflowers. Sunflower oil was in fashion, and it had begun to be exported more frequently a couple of years ago. Clarisa was enthusiastic about the idea, and she accompanied us every day, doing any task, bringing us food, going back and forth from the house to the field for anything. She had never seen her so active, and sometimes she would sit and watch us work late into the night. She then accompanied us on the way back, talking to distract us from the tiredness we felt. And shortly after arriving home, she ran ahead to prepare the water that our mother had already heated for the bath. When we arrived, we undressed and each one in turn got into the large basin, while the other

dried himself or shaved. We made a lot of noise, but dad, waiting for his turn in bed, took the food that my mother offered him. Maybe tiredness is also silence; Just as weak muscles can no longer raise themselves, tired ears stop hearing or muffle annoying sounds. That noise of laughter and obscenities from the other side of the narrow house must have been a blessing for my old man.

In a few months he was going to turn fifty, and he had nothing. The land we live on is not ours, but belongs to a rancher who owns titles to one hundred and twelve hectares in all directions. The sunflower field is there, still blooming and tall, but who knows for how long. Tomorrow we will begin to harvest the harvest. I know what the old woman will say, but I don't think Clarisa misses dad that much. In recent months they have become closer, but only as two strangers who know they will not see each other for long, only as long as the sunflower season lasts.

When she was born, the family had begun to enter the worst times, but I can't say that the previous ones would have been any less terrible. When one is very young, he thinks that things have always been this way, and he is happy not missing what he has not known. But those who did, bear the indelible mark of obfuscation and anger on their faces. I grew up seeing that in the faces of my brothers and my father. Each one bore it as best he could, sometimes hiding it, other times removing the mask like someone exposing an ulcer that does not want to close. Pedro was the most dissatisfied, the one who showed his anger the most. However, every morning he woke up with the crowing of the rooster, without protesting, and he headed towards the field almost without taking more than two mates and without even saying good morning.

We arrived at the sunflower field. The truck wasn't going to enter the path between the plants, so Raúl put it on its back and we went down. Pedro climbed back to untie the ropes. Raúl and I pulled the legs and picked up the body. We hoisted him on our shoulders like a bag of potatoes. Raúl held him by the back, I by the legs. That morning when he left the house he didn't seem to weigh that much. He had been dead for a few hours, his flesh still warm through the blanket. But the trip to the field seemed to have cooled him down, and with the cold the dead weight had increased. Who knows if the cold is not too well something similar to time. Just as each hour crushes the crooked back of an old man a little more, the cold turns the gaseous vapor of warm flesh into the hard frost of inert muscle destined to petrify. Winter has that peculiarity, it makes shapes persist, it freezes and immortalizes the appearance of things, be they puddled water in an abandoned pool or the hands of a man caressing a dog.

We chose winter because then his body would be preserved longer, and he could then contemplate the way in which everything would continue to grow and die in spite of him. It was a way of telling him that the alternatives were always there, far from his hands, but shining like cruel suns on crops tired of heat and longing for fresh water. That's us, we wanted to tell him,

shapes created by you, old man, bags of potatoes that one day others will carry, but while we have life, we want to see your body preserved until spring does its task, its duty, an obligatory act, as if Until spring I was afraid or resentful or felt that even your body, my old man, deserves to be preserved a little longer as a sign of mercy and as a sign of punishment too.

Pedro went down and helped Raúl. They both took the path among sunflowers carrying our father's back on their shoulders. I was behind, holding the legs. The old man was not obese, except for the bulge in his abdomen. His legs, however, seemed to have grown weaker as he grew older. It must have been half past six in the morning. The sun was a quarter above the horizon. The sunflowers seemed to be turning that way, although many were looking at us, three men and a dead man on a surface of dry earth, surrounded by bees and wasps that came and went from the large flowers, open like black wells with edges of golden metal. . The combination of black and yellow seemed more contrasting to me than ever before. Lights containing the blackness, limiting it so that it absorbs the structure of the world, dosing it but being servitude and owner at the same time of that darkness in its center.

I looked up at the sun, for a black moment, surrounded by the golden edge of its rays. I knew it was one of those tricks of the eyes, optical tricks to which light has accustomed our eyes, small and fragile organs limited in their effectiveness and wisdom. Defenses that they use so that the sublime light does not transform into permanent darkness, nor does the darkness become too accustomed to inhabiting them.

Middle terms, that's what we are, I think. Stationary bodies like the one who will now be my father on the earth that still needs to be torn from winter. Still covered with a certain frost covering the leaves and golden petals of these sunflowers that have survived the harshest cold, like miracle workers, like makers of phenomena, like hands not of God, but of the sun created in the likeness of the almighty.

Father Maccabeus sometimes sensed the traces of ancient pagan idolatry in the prayers, or rather on the lips of the peasants who went to mass. He read in the lips that were praying the Lord's Prayer, other words that he did not understand, and that is why he believed he knew that they were the spirits of the ancient idolaters who remained in the successors just as the color of the eyes remains in the same family generation after generation. generation.

My brothers stopped.

"Here we will dig," said Raúl.

We left the body on the ground and each of us rubbed our waists as if we had been working in the field. And that's what we were going to do, we just hadn't even started yet.

"Go get the shovels," he ordered me.

I obeyed and made my way back to the truck. I took out the three shovels and carried them on my shoulders. When I returned to the clearing, my brothers were not alone.

2

I had not seen or heard him arrive, he must have entered through another path. But the question was how long had he seen us, because after entering the sunflower field it was difficult for him to have discovered us from outside. Old Doctor Ruiz was mounted on his black sorrel, with shiny hair on his haunches and flanks, looking at us all with the haughty, proud and contemptuous pose of his. The saddle had a very fine, colored wool blanket, and he was dressed in his usual cream-colored suit, pants tucked into his boots, a coat, vest and tie, black gloves and an elegant brown leather harness, which had inscription the initials of his name: Adalberto Ruiz.

It was normal to see him walking through the fields so early, sometimes one would find him on the way to the harvest, returning to his house after watching a sick person all night. He was a good doctor, excellent in the opinion of some. Large in body, almost obese, his character matched his appearance. We were all afraid of his outbursts of anger, translated into abrupt gestures, slamming doors, and furious shouts. He didn't mind making people suffer pain if he had to. correct a sprained leg or arm, whether to remove a splinter or suture a wound without anesthesia. Many times, and it was almost always in reality, he did not have items in his briefcase, and he did not waste time sending for what was necessary to his office or transporting the patient. If she could resolve the matter there and now, he would.

And we liked that, but it was also his way of commanding respect. As he was now looking at us, I saw a lot of trouble coming.

"What are you doing, boys?" he asked, raising a hand to his forehead to remove his cap and scratch his head of short white hair.

My brothers looked at each other, I remained somewhat apart with the shovels on my shoulder. The body was next to them on the ground. Ruiz looked at me, I dropped the shovels.

"Dad died last night," said Raúl.

Ruiz waited for him to continue, but that silence had begun to make him nervous, it was noticeable in his legs, which were hitting the horse's flanks. The animal snorted and moved restlessly, but Ruiz controlled it.

-What the hell are you talking about? I did see him yesterday and he was fine.

This time the three of us looked at each other.

-I was eating, doctor, and suddenly he choked, grabbed his chest and fell to the floor. The old woman brought him that remedy you gave him for asthma, but he was already dead.

Ruiz furrowed his eyebrows and muttered an obscenity that I didn't hear. Then he said out loud:

-The bitch if I believe them! It seems strange to me that Clotilde hasn't sent for me...

Another pause from both sides. You could hear the screeching of some birds, the hum of bees flying over the sunflowers. It must have been almost seven in the morning. It was still cold. We were sweating.

"The old woman is sad, but what's going to be done to her..." Raúl said, calmly, as if he didn't notice the doctor's growing obfuscation.

Ruiz was already completely pissed off:

-But do you think I'm an idiot? Something strange happened here and they are going to tell me now...

"We have to bury the old man, doctor," said Pedro.

Ruiz looked at him amazed. It was not common to see Pedro speak, although that was the type of response he usually gave.

-So the Espinoza boys think they are grown up and are going to bury their old man without a box, without a wake, without a death certificate. In short, without anything.

He got off the horse and said:

-Open that package now and show what you bring!

And it was when I saw him dismount that I decided to do something for my brothers. They had defended me many times, protected me, and somehow prevented me from growing or maturing. It was their fault that I was still a boy, and that they treated me as such. That's why I grabbed a shovel, and even though I was far away, I threw one at my brothers. Raúl caught it in the air, and holding it like a shotgun, he stood in Ruiz's path.

The doctor stood up surprised. He was used to getting his way and doing what he wanted, most of the time because they let him. This time he didn't seem to expect to encounter resistance, much less that kind of obstacle. The Espinoza brothers were ready for anything, I thought I read in his expression.

-This is our business, doctor. Nobody has called him, so he doesn't get involved," Pedro said.

-Go take care of the sick, doctor. "Our old man is already dead," said Raúl, almost conciliatory and reasonable.

But Dr. Ruiz was an important person in the town. He had his own hacienda, where he made a few laborers work cultivating his fields and raising livestock. He grew vines and sent the harvest to his small wine factory on the outskirts of La Plata. He participated in town meetings, and had his voice and vote in the neighborhood council. He was a close friend of the mayor of the party, and he went to see him every time the sick gave him time to escape to the Mayor's Office. Our town is called “Los Perros”, although I understand that it is not an official name, and depends on the district of Chacomús, and here there are no more than fifty established inhabitants, at most. Dr. Ruiz has a son who also studied as a doctor and had just graduated a few months ago. Back in the town, he began to help him with visits, to pass on clients. He is a shy, quiet guy, afraid of his father, it seems to me.

-Don't worry, doctor, his son signed the death certificate for us.

The doctor started to laugh, not sarcastically, but he interpreted what I told him as an innocent joke, like the one a boy who can't grasp the seriousness of the situation might say.

"It's true," I insisted. I have the paper at home, under the mattress of my bed.

-But you seriously think that I'm an old sign, I think... Get that shovel out of here... -he said, pushing Raúl.

This time the three of us stood in front, and the three shovels formed a star in front of the doctor. He struggled a little to not look like he was giving up so quickly, and said:

-So we have these, right? you do whatever they want, but I'm not moving from here. They'll have to kill me and bury me with the old man, but I'm not leaving.

He crossed his arms and waited.

Now he had us in check. I don't know how to play chess, but that's what I heard the same doctor say many times when he was telling things in the

town bar, or when he came to see us when we got sick. Let's fight the flu, he said, or the fatigue, depending on what it was.

"Go look for the little doctor, Nicanor," Raúl told me. This is how you convince yourself. Because I don't think he'll do it even if we show him the part.

-Now they are thinking, but anyway this is bullshit. I'm going to bring the commissioner...

-Not for now, doctor...

Pedro spoke like this, without hiding his threat. The doctor looked at him with fear for the first time. I turned around and returned to the path. I got into the truck and headed towards the Ruiz house.

3

The ranch was ten kilometers to the south. Although he had a station wagon and a car to go to the city, Dr. Ruiz made his visits on horseback. He liked to raise and maintain his flock of sorrels, always well fed and cared for by Dr. Dergan, the town veterinarian.

I remembered, as I was driving to the Ruiz house, the expression on the young doctor's face when the three of us went to talk to him. We found him the previous afternoon in the field, when he was doing his post-lunch walk.

"Hello, doctor," Raúl had said.

Bernardo Ruiz stopped dead, surprised to see the three of us, or perhaps startled to see himself separated from his thoughts. He was wearing riding pants, a black linen shirt, a green cap and a cigarette between his lips. He was still very young, he couldn't have been more than twenty-three years old and he had graduated with the best averages, according to what they said in the town. Nicanor thought, and it was an assumption that was confirmed by what later happened, that he was a man too dominated by the personality of his father. Every time they were together, the boy became a shadow, sometimes a puppet that repeated what the old man told him. Only upon meeting him did they see him more relaxed, and he expanded more in his conversation. But when someone mentioned his father, even if he wasn't there, he would return to his shy, embarrassed attitude. And in that town, where old Dr. Ruiz was better known than grass, it was impossible that upon seeing his son they would not send greetings to the old man.

"What are you looking for, guys?" he asked.

-To you, little doctor. We need you to do us a favor.

Pedro and I stand aside a little, we pretend to talk to each other. Raúl got closer to Ruiz and said something in his ear.

The doctor turned away from him, dropped the cigarette from his mouth, took off his cap, and rubbed his eyes. He looked around. He looked at Pedro and me. He knew that the three of us had come to support each other. Only one would have been intimacy confused with complicity towards him, but the three of us constituted an exact balance between trust and threat. We had not thought of it that way, for us going together was nothing more than a habit, a guarantee of unconditional support. We had learned that from our father, not because he had taught it to us with those words, but as a result and consequence of his life, of the life that he had chosen for himself and for us. There was no other way to defend ourselves from the destruction in which she was obstinate to continue serving, as if she were a goddess more powerful than God himself because she was so attractive, she gave off such a woman's aroma despite her ruined clothes and her strange and sinister face. , that it was impossible for him to resist her.

For this reason, our mother's prayers, her attachment to religion, her strict obedience to Christian morality, which, however, were more a custom than a belief, nothing could dent that obstinacy, that infatuation. My mother prayed, she went to mass, she fulfilled the commandments, she had images and cards, she put a drop of holy water on her forehead every night, and she did the same with each of us before going to bed. But she also smiled, hiding her lips with one hand when the veterinarian gave his usual blasphemous speeches and ranted against priests and the church.

"We saw it with Dr. Dergan," said Raúl. They were with one of the whores, with Luisa, if I'm not mistaken. They left the door open, inadvertently, and the three of them were having fun, having a good time. Also, between the two of you... I don't know if you understand what I mean.

Dr. Ruiz was nervous, his hands had a slight tremor that he tried to hide by holding them together. He lit another cigarette, but he couldn't. Raúl lit a match and brought a steady flame to it.

-No problem, doctor. Between us, we know that this happens from time to time...

We had known him since he was a child, we had played together a couple of times near the river, we had fished some Sundays. But this was before they sent him to school p private and then to the university. But Raúl had understood what the relationship between the boy and his father was like. Anything, desire or word that deviated from what old Ruiz considered correct was cause for punishment. Then the boy would withdraw, obedient and even consumed by the sorrow of his own life that was disappearing.

He knew now, as we have always known, that the slightest rumor that reached his father's ears would be not only a family catastrophe, but a tighter and more enervating tightening of the chain with which the old man tied him.

-But it was only once...

Raúl did not answer, determined to deny having heard such a childish response from a man who had gone through university. If there they taught to be so naive, it was better to stay in the countryside and learn about human relationships with beasts, plants and whores. That was what I told myself as I listened to the young doctor's babbling, until I felt nauseated by his stupidity, and his cowardice.

-With us he is safe, doctor, you don't have to doubt that. We are men and we understand it. But if it becomes known, if by chance Doña Eva finds out...

Doña Eva was the town seamstress. Her house was like the center of the world for the local women. There she knew everything, absolutely, about what was happening in the town and the surrounding area. If we wanted to be sure of something about someone, all we had to do was send our mother or sister to that house to find out.

Ruiz backed away, looking at us as if we were about to kill him. He went into the weed after him, but we saw his head above the plants, retreating for fear of turning his back on us.

Pedro and I were going to look for him, but Raúl said it wasn't necessary. With just one more word from him, he managed to convince him to come back.

-We are only asking you for the favor that I told you a while ago, doctor. A signature on a piece of paper and everything will be legal.

That afternoon, young Dr. Ruiz returned with us. Our old man had been in bed since noon, when he returned from work in the sunflower field feeling bad. The four of us sat at the table, the doctor took out a sheaf of papers from his briefcase, asked us for the old man's information to fill out the form and signed his signature and seal. He looked up at the glass of wine that Pedro was offering him. Both looks were serious, but I thought they hid a smile, or maybe I imagined it. Ruiz rejected the glass, closed the briefcase and left.

I arrived at the stay. About ten dogs greeted me, barking and following the truck. I parked in front of the entrance and asked the foreman about the young doctor. Then I saw Ruiz look out the door, then he came out and approached.

-His father sent for him, doctor.

He made an expression of enormous sadness, I could almost see him crying right there, under the morning sun and in front of his foreman. But he didn't, he just got in the truck and looked at me like an embarrassed kid.

-What happened?

-Nothing, doctor. His father wants to confirm that you signed the certificate. He doesn't believe us. He is in the sunflower field...

-Like in the field, and why is he there with you?

I didn't want to explain more; Knowing him, I thought he was capable of getting off and hiding.

When we arrived, I saw his expression change from the most irrational fear to absolute amazement when he saw the bundle with the body and the shovels in the hands of my brothers, who had already dug more than half of the grave.

"Finally," said old Ruiz. These criminals want to bury the father without a coffin. I wouldn't be surprised if they killed him.

The old man grabbed his son by his arm and patted her on the back, showing the pride he felt for his excellent son, to us, the ungrateful, the caste children of a bad mother.

"They say you signed the death certificate," he laughed as he said it.

But young Ruiz did not share his laughter. That university student, who was a doctor and had seen death and corpses on campus, seemed like a five-year-old boy paralyzed by the imminent threat that he saw coming from his father. Then the old man changed his laugh of complacency and mockery for a gesture of absolute disapproval. But before condemning, he offered to hesitate for a moment.

-You didn't do it, did you?

Bernardo Ruiz looked down at the disturbed earth. His feet seemed to be looking for firm support on the irregularity of the terrain, but they couldn't find it. Suddenly the old man slapped him and the boy staggered. He looked like he was about to fall into the pit, but luckily he didn't. I felt sorry for him. I should kill him, I told myself; You should get rid of the old man, he would have told him if I had dared. But Dr. Ruiz also intimidated me, and it was a problem that was still far from being solved.

-How could you, without consulting me? "You piece of idiot!" He hit him again and shook him by the shoulder. Answer me!

-It was last night, dad. I was returning from town with D ergan...

-Yes, from the whorehouse, like every night, and drunk too.

The old man crossed his arms and listened to him with arrogance and contempt.

-I passed near the Espinoza house, all the lights were on, like when there is a wake. I went straight there to ask if something was wrong, and they told me that Don Pedro had died while they were having dinner. They took me to where the body was and I confirmed death. There were no signs of violence or anything like that, Dad. His face was still a little purple, and I realized it had been a heart attack. Then I went home, you were already sleeping, I didn't want to wake you up for a routine procedure. I grabbed the papers and brought them to him signed.

-But if you were in a mess, how can you be sure, you piece of shit?!

He shook him by the shoulder again and finally left him alone. Bernardo Ruiz didn't even try to look up again. The father gave us a look as if he were shooting us.

-So they won this one, but I'm not going to stop insisting that they bury him properly. I don't know what's going on in your minds, and I don't even care why you're doing it. But this is not right, and I'm going to take care of bringing the commissioner. Now that my son is here, they won't think of killing us both to avoid it, I suppose. Come on!-He told the boy. He remounted and told her to ride the sorrel with him. The young man did so reluctantly and we watched them leave at a fast trot.

My brothers continued with their shovels resting on the ground, then they handed me the third one and I started digging with them. They didn't say anything, I expected them to smile, at least; I felt that we had obtained a superb triumph over the conceited old man. But then I saw the lump right next to my feet, and I knew everything was just beginning. I knew that laughter is as ephemeral as a man's life, that the land where we were trying to penetrate was not a whore that every night in the world made the squeamishness of a naive virgin, that every man must cry to tear away its smell and pray for the rest of his life. to reduce the amount of intense grief when you return to it.

When we finished, our father's body lay under two meters of damp earth, still cold from the morning. We hit the shovel several times to flatten the earth. Then we walked back along the trail to the truck. There he was, sitting in the trunk, young Dr. Ruiz.

"I couldn't go with him," he told us. I stayed to watch them dig. You looked like three strong, dirty reaping angels, with your shirts open, wielding your scythes in the harvest. I just expected to hear them whistle as they worked, but they didn't. It would have been an interesting detail, without a doubt.

The young doctor Ruiz left town a few days later. We learned that he argued with his father loudly for two nights, then he no longer saw her. Some said that he had gone to practice in Buenos Aires.

But old Ruiz decided to make our lives impossible.

4

It was almost nine in the morning when we returned home. We returned in complete silence. In the midst of my brothers, and like them, I kept my eyes fixed on the road. The dirt rose from the sides of the truck and dust entered through the broken windows. Although winter was ending, our shirts were soaked in our armpits and backs, the dust got into our eyes and we felt it stick to our bodies as if it wanted to take us away before our time. Since they have been digging in my belly, it seemed to tell us, feel the taste of my tongue. The earth has its ally, the wind. The wind is the architect and the hands of the earth, it forms and guides the instruments that invade the smallest recesses of the world. I was afraid, because I felt in my own hands something more than the smell of the earth we had been removing. I smelled the smell of the waste with which they had once fertilized the sunflower field.

Why did we take my father there? It was his last crazy dream, his last failed delirium. The most important effort, perhaps, to remain true to himself. If everything he had tried before, the flooded crops in Santa Fe, the harvest lost by the storm in Junín, the fire in the countryside in the south of Córdoba, was a continuous hitting against an invisible wall in the middle of the plain, the field of sunflowers It would then be his swan song. He would not have thought of it like that, with that rhetorical figure that I use now, because he did not have the education to create it, but he did have the sensitivity to form and germinate the seed of his birth. Because an act is born, it is not invented or programmed, it is simply born from a spontaneous will. As intimate and uncertain as God's will when creating the first atom of life.

Father Maccabeus said that our father was irresponsible towards his family and a sinner according to the law of God. What bothered him was that she didn't go to his church on Sundays. Fame and rise in the ig Lesia depend on the number of parishioners, I suppose, and those who missed mass had to be scared and threatened with the fire of hell, so that they would return to the correct path, which was the town road that ended at the street where the chapel was. and the parishioner.

I remember when we arrived in Los Perros after having visited more than twenty towns and three provinces. I barely remembered half of them, because the ones where my parents and siblings tried to settle were before my birth. In any case, I was able to see my father's dejection, the abrupt fall of his previously always firm spirit. I saw the silence dominating him day by day, making his face a sun-beaten grimace, his hair a shell that was little by little falling off, his legs a pair of skinny, splintered poles. The day we arrived with the wagon, because we didn't even have a truck then, we entered the abandoned shack that smelled of horse manure and dead dogs. A week later, our mother had managed to clean enough to be able to sleep, and our father, after cutting the weed in the surrounding area, had gone to explore the field he planned to cultivate.

For two months, I watched him go every morning and return at noon to sit on a cut log in front of the house. He rolled up his pants and I could see his skinny legs, which not long before were thick and strong. He did not know that he was watching him, he took out from his shirt pocket a rustic pipe that he had found lying on the ground once and lit it with the flame that he obtained by rubbing a match against the bark of the old trunk.

I was nine years old, and it was the first time I saw the passion that was in his eyes when he looked at the flame. The fire woke him up. It was like alcohol to an alcoholic. I knew, from what he had heard from my mother and Raúl, that since I was born, my father had not devoured the fields with fire again.

For my father burned the fields that had failed in his hands, to cleanse the rot of his uselessness and renew the land. He said, because he had heard it from his own father and from many landowners and experts, that the old earth needs to be renewed, and for this the fire, by destroying everything except the roots, makes it gain new strength and the vegetation grows greener and stronger. It was a task that he decided to assign himself as if God himself had entrusted it to him. Even so he took it for granted when he went to town and told his anecdotes, his failed work in the fields of all those towns he had passed through. People listened to him as if he were telling half-truths, simple things told as feats to hide with decorative colors what has nothing more than the hues of ash.

We had to return home before Dr. Ruiz arrived with the commissioner, we had to update mom on what had happened. Before we reached fifty meters from the door, we saw Clarisa and mother waiting for us restlessly, walking around on the dry earth, our sister's worn espadrilles raising dust and the old woman's flat shoes trying to resist the sudden and abrupt steps a little longer. nervous of that woman who did not weigh much, but with a strength concentrated in short and tense muscles like knots, like roots of a tree more than a hundred years old. And it was then that, even from a

distance, and more by imagination than by having actually seen her, I discovered from a distance that my mother's face had suddenly aged.

When they saw us coming, they walked towards us. We got off and the old woman clung to Raúl and Pedro's arms, holding each one with her firm hands like the claws of a female eaglet. Her face even looked like that of a bird in her extreme curiosity to know what had happened.

-I woke up and her father was no longer in bed. I got up and you were gone. "The only one there was this one," she said, pointing to the Poor Clare. My sister looked like a helpless little bird, a sparrow looking from one side to the other trying to understand.

"Old lady," Raúl began to say. The old man left us last night.

There was a silence that needed to be broken in some way, because it was intolerable, it was completely outside of what can be conceived as silence. An absence of sound that more resembled the misconception of nothingness, because in nothingness there is no silence either, only something very remotely similar, like an imitation. When the complete, absolute and enormous silence invades the ears, there is no longer any heart that can resist, because it has already been emptied of fluids and blood, and has stopped for some time. The flesh is silent, it honors that nothingness to which it will go very soon, on the unbreakable wheels of oblivion.

At that moment I knew that I too could be a prophet if I set my mind to it, not a fortune teller, but a prophet. I didn't know the future, only l the consequences of the future. I saw our mother's face age twenty years in half a minute. I saw her eyes observing each of the three of us, carefully, with a caution that seemed more like terror than suspicion. I knew the way she looked at us when she suspected we were hiding something from her, a prank when we were kids, or a mistake very close to unforgivable when we became men. She noticed it in our expressions, the sense and the grimace of guilt that we couldn't avoid when we met her. We felt like we were carrying the smell of misunderstanding, stuck on our foreheads like a tick that we couldn't get rid of. And yet, when she looked at us, and after intense pain, her tick began to loosen.

When her gaze reached me, I realized she was going to cry. But because she wanted to avoid it, she took a deep breath and she fell to the floor, sitting, wringing her hands on her apron. We all gathered around her to help her up. We asked if he was feeling okay, and despite knowing how stupid the question was, at least we managed to break that silence that Mom's look had only brought to such a high level of sadness and despair that I, at least , and perhaps my brothers, we would not have endured without confessing. I mean the truth. Confession, like sin, is a part, one more fragment of the fabric of truth, which does not support detachments or fissures, because it would no longer bear such a worthy name.

What followed, and what she said before and after, were versions, not even those musical variations that cultured musicians like so much. They were inventions that were taking on the irritating tone of the original, outbursts of a psychopath, violent delusions of a madman who knows nothing more than to invent realities to survive.

I know what Raúl was going to explain. I would say that Dad woke up before dawn and went to look for him in his bed. His face was darker than the night and it was difficult for him to breathe. I would say that the old man died on his body, with his arms clinging to his son's shoulders, his chest dry as a log felled on his own chest, and his legs thrown, no longer supported, on the side of the bed. Since we didn't want her to suffer, we had decided to act on our own. We had even rehearsed our regretful grimaces. But none of this was necessary.

"You..." Mom said, without emphasis, without a greater or lesser exhalation of breath in the word. Maybe that's why she sounded so impersonal, cold and steely, as if she had spit out a piece of railroad track, and we were seeing it in front of us, freshly dropped from our mother's mouth. She, who had kissed us just the previous afternoon, was capable of uttering obscenities and cruel sentences just by saying a pronoun, and also without a hint of exaltation or fury.

She raised her arms automatically, as if she accepted the help we offered her, without realizing that those who were her children were also the probable murderers of her husband. Probable because perhaps she still retained the weak, useless and utopian hope not that she was the cause of death, but that she was dreaming. There are nightmares that are welcome, blessed nightmares that deserve to be called daydreams of God, if they meet the essential requirement of ending with dawn, of disappearing with the light of day and driving us out of their dark rooms full of corpses towards the bright street of reality. . The present as a gift, a dream of inverted parentheses between the intermittent and obligatory visits to those rooms. Who drags us down and who makes us, I have asked myself many times, as I walked through the fields recently devoured by the fire that my father had lit a short time before. The door between wakefulness and sleep is like those paths that I walked to contemplate the devastated lands of crops turned into ash, of earth covered in ash, of fathoms emitting thick smoke as if hell itself had loomed for a few days.

Father Macabeo said it a couple of times at mass. We listened to him knowing that he was referring to dad.

-There are places where the ceiling of hell is very thin. All you have to do is stand barefoot and feel the fire in the earth. There are pawns of the devil here in the fields.

Mom hadn't made a single face that Sunday morning at church. When the mass ended, we saw her get up and walk down the aisle without turning

around to genuflect. She turned her back on God in front of the priest himself, and that was the best response I have ever seen in my life.

She was like that, with the eloquence of silence before and after a single word, if she had any need, she would say everything she had to say. That's why we stood still for a while, although we knew that at any moment the doctor and the commissioner would arrive, and that we must We were going to tell Mom what we had planned to say. But that was also unnecessary. The old woman's expression was not an ecstatic and useful element for a single response, like everything brief or everything that generally affects silence, it was more extensive, and brought with it its own capacity for procreation. We didn't need to tell her that she had to cover us.

Before, however, something happened that we did not expect. Not because it was unexpected, but because we had forgotten that Clarisa was already a woman, and we underestimated her intelligence and her feelings.

While the truck's engine continued its efforts to remain steady, and a flock of birds passed quickly and indifferently above us, leaving their shadow, cooling the ice that was slowly forming between us a little more, Clarisa gave a scream . The birds fled faster, the dogs lying huddled in their blankets by the wall of the house raised their heads, tensed their ears and barked. Clarisa said:

-I know where they took him!

She ran off towards the sunflower field. She was still in her nightclothes, a cotton nightgown that hung above her knees. Mom called her, Pedro went after her. We saw them disappear behind the hill that separated us from the sunflower field.

Almost at the same time, on the other side, from the path that crosses the ravine behind the house, we saw a cloud of dust rising into the sky. Not long after, the commissioner's truck appeared completely dirty, with dried mud covering the police shield and filthy windshields. He stopped ten meters from us, the commissioner got down from one side, and Dr. Ruiz from the other. They hadn't brought reinforcements, so it wasn't likely that they were going to arrest us. I looked at my brothers and they shared that certainty, so we felt safer, more untouchable, perhaps, and if pride is also an aura I know that our bodies would be shining at that moment. Maybe someone noticed it, the dogs, perhaps, or less instinctive but deeper looks, like that of God or the look of demons that live in the countryside and come out only at night, hidden during the day behind men.

"Hello, Mrs...." said the commissioner. He was a short, plump man, with a gray uniform that was adapted to the needs of the countryside, such as wearing a scarf around his neck for sweat, boots with spurs, because despite riding in a truck he sometimes rode a horse. Several times we saw him in winter with a goatskin jacket that his wife had made for him, and it was strange then to consider him a police officer in those clothes. He wasn't

a bad guy, he had chosen to make himself seen and repress certain facts when he had no other choice. The mayor and the people of the neighborhood council pressured him from both sides, and he, far from becoming bad blood, limited himself to complying.

"Doña Clotilde," said the doctor. Is she aware of what happened to her husband? Do you know what her children did?

The old man had ignored us and was heading directly to our mother, with his hat in one hand and a black cigarette in the other. From time to time he blew his whistle, and his calls were followed by a column of smoke that he exhaled upwards, so as not to disturb my mother.

She nodded her head. She now had her hands busy nervously playing with the apron, her gaze somewhat lost between the doctor's obese and enormous figure and the field of sunflowers in the distance.

-Is what they told me true, Doña Clotilde?

The doctor asked slowly, perhaps calculated in the conversation that he had surely had with the commissioner while they were coming here. He expected to find dissidence, contradictions.

Mom nodded again, silently, this time looking at us, but what we read in her eyes was in no way what the doctor should be seeing. Certain resentments, still weak, certain reproaches that come with difficulty, because of who they come from and because those to whom they are directed are loved ones. This is not always the case, the bloodiest feelings usually arise between members of the same family, but in the case of my mother it was different. She, somehow, had a trait, an area of her heart where nothing but the hard rock of her thoughts grew. She loved, but that was not why she created idols; She could hate, but she could not step on the burning wasteland of her resentment.

"What happened to Don Pedro, Mrs.?" the commissioner intervened.

-Raúl, tell him, I don't feel up to it.

"No, no... I don't want to listen to these disrespectful brats, you tell us," Ruiz said.

Raúl stepped forward and stood between the doctor and our mother.

-If the problem is with us, take us to the police station, but don't bother my mother. Have some fucking respect.

-No one is going to go to the police station until I say so.

The commissioner opened his arms to accentuate his words, he looked like a pacifier. I don't think he was sincere, but he didn't seem to give much credit to Dr. Ruiz either.

-Come on, Raúl, tell us what happened, and your mother will tell us if it's true. Do you agree, doctor?

Ruiz reluctantly accepted, but stood right next to the old woman to catch any strange gesture. He was looking for some sign of remorse, perhaps, or hoping she would break down during my brother's story and finally confess the truth. That is, what Dr. Ruiz considered true.

-Look, commissioner. Yesterday the old man returned from the field at noon. I was in the town. When I came back I found him lying on the bed. He had vomited at the door, and the dogs were eating the vomit. What's wrong, old man? I asked him. He pointed to his belly, and it was paler than wax. My mother and my sister had gone early to Doña Eva's house, to prepare the dresses for next week's festival, did he see? All the women spend the whole day there. I put a piece of meat on the fire and cleaned up what the old man had messed up. I made him soup, but he didn't want to eat it.

-And why didn't you call me?

Raúl just raised his shoulders, with a blank face, like a boy who doesn't know what he did wrong. How similar he is to dad, I thought when listening to him, even he has the same voice as him.

"I continued..." said the commissioner.

-It was around five o'clock when my brothers returned from the field, they work for a neighbor some days, at least until it's time to harvest the sunflowers. So I told them about the old man, and the three of us sat down to think if it was better to call the doctor or wait for Mom. It was almost dusk when the old man got out of bed and appeared next to the table, resting his hands and demanding food. He stood tall and rubbed his belly. I'm better now, he told me, that soup you made me was already cold, but I still liked it. I'm glad, I told him, so we each started doing our own things until the women arrived and Mom prepared dinner. Then what I told you before happened to him, doctor, while he was eating he turned purple and clutched his chest. And he collapsed on the floor.

-There is a death certificate, I understand, right?

-Yes, commissioner. Nicanor, go look for him.

I ran to the house and returned with the paper that Raúl had put under the mattress of my bed. The doctor was about to protest, but the commissioner silenced him by showing him the signature of his son.

-I know, my son confirmed it to me, but he was upset, it's not worth signing a death certificate in that state.

The commissioner looked at him steadily, motioned for him to step aside a little to speak in private. I could hear the murmuring only because the dogs had decided to be silent after a long time of barking at our visitors.

Maybe they, the dogs, were also our accomplices. They were family, who could deny it.

-Doctor, if he takes this further, he is going to have to discredit his son as well, and they can take away the boy's registration. Think about it a little.

Ruiz looked at us with contained anger. Then he addressed my mother:

-But Doña Clotilde, how are you going to let them bury him without a coffin...

She looked at us, confused and afraid, for a moment.

-Why, doctor? I told them to do it like this. I only follow the precepts of Father Maccabeus, doctor. He read us parts of the Old Testament where it is said that we came from the earth and to the earth we will return. My husband loved the earth and that is why he burned it so many times, to see it born again. He loved her so much that he sacrificed us all, doctor, me and my children. He loved her because he knew that the earth is the only thing that does not die.

It was the first time we had heard her say so many words in a row, except when he was praying. And that's what he seemed to be doing now.

-I do what he would have wanted, doctor. I told my children to take his father to sleep forever with his lover, his mother, his sister. I'm not jealous now, at one time I was, but not anymore. My children love me as he did with his land, wherever he went. Here, in the Chaco or in La Pampa. The earth is one, doctor. You should know, the bones say it, and as we age they become more talkative. Like Doña Eva, did he see? In her house everything is said because we women listen to the chatter about bones and diseases. As long as there is land, the bones say, we will be home.

His hands were clutching his apron, and his forehead was sweating despite the cold. The cheeks were hot, the skin on the neck somewhat pale. But perhaps it was the wind, which, by carrying Clarisa's cry from the sunflower field, caused those changes in her always straight and unharmed body, and not what she had just said. Because it was like listening to a preacher or a prophet.

Dr. Ruiz presented his farewell greeting in silence, but I heard him say under his breath:

-Everyone is crazy, in that family all are crazy…

The commissioner waited for me to get into the truck, and stayed with us to clarify certain things, according to what he said.

-Look, Dona, if you repent, because you have put your children in trouble, we can go back and have the funeral properly. I promise to turn a

blind eye to what happened today. But you know, the doctor can continue with his purpose, and I can't do anything...

-I'm not going to dig up my husband, commissioner. That's sacrilege. It's worse, and I know what I'm saying, than leaving it even without a grave.

-But...

At that moment a loud scream from Clarisa was heard, and Pedro's voice telling her to shut up.

-You see, commissioner. I'm not going to make my daughter cry more than once for her father. Would you do that with her children?

"I don't have children, Doña Clotilde, thank God," he said, looking at Raúl and me.

5

I was eight years old the day they came to get dad. We had settled near Coronda, in some fields that my old man managed to rent with what he had obtained from the previous harvest in Córdoba. We had done well there, I seem to remember, or at least that's what he said. I only remember leaving the Cordoba farm one Saturday morning, with us and our few belongings in a truck. The driver was known to the old man, and since he had to go to Buenos Aires via Santa Fe, dad asked him to take us. So it was that after bringing up the kitchen things that my mother dragged from one place to another, the leather suitcases, old and with worn ribbons, where we carried the few winter clothes, because in the summer we sometimes wore nothing but pants. . But since we were constantly changing location, and therefore climate, the clothes quickly deteriorated in the unexpected rain that awaited us in a town two days after having left the previous one under a hot midsummer sun.

There, near Coronda, we stayed for a year. We grew wheat, but my old man had been disillusioned with the experience of growing barley in Córdoba. I don't know who had recommended it to him, but he had become infatuated with reserving at least one sector for this experiment. It turned out that he must have dedicated more time to this crop than to the rest of the common crops that were going to feed us. It did not rain, there was no hail or flood that season, but my father's time was like that of all men, it lasted no more than twenty-four hours, and he did not abstain from sleeping. He was neglecting the other fields at the expense of barley, he went to and returned from the city with brochures and papers where he wrote down what they recommended for forage. He spent hours standing in

front of the barley plants, which were dying and he didn't know how to avoid it. My mother already knew him and she didn't say anything. Raúl worked in the other fields, but he couldn't do much alone. We couldn't pay peones, and Pedro, who was eleven years old, came back tired and mother forbade him to go out into the field again. I had just turned nine years old, and it was the first time I discovered the fire that Dad created.

It was more than a revelation, because until then I had heard conversations that meant nothing, I saw angry faces that didn't catch my attention. My life was happening somewhere else, there but on another, more innocent level, an untouchable place, perhaps, despite the poverty of which I was not aware. I ate and played with the dogs, I had warm clothes and a warm bed that I shared with my brothers. I had a mother and a father, and sometimes I even received a gift, a doll made of wood and rags, or a cloth ball that I took to the plain to kick, while the dogs followed me, running and barking. I fished in the streams or played in the manure-mixed mud between the horses my old man used to plow.

There was a barn full of old tools, rusty plows, broken shovels, car tires, where I spent hours exploring the spaces between those piled up objects. It was a special world for me, far from the house and the sun, far from the arguments between the old man and Raúl, which at that time were beginning to become more frequent.

I left there when I heard someone shout “fire!” When I looked out I saw the flames no more than three kilometers away, right in the barley field. It was getting dark, but it seemed to be noon again with the luminosity and heat of the flames. My family was gathered at the door of the old house, except for Dad, who appeared on the path that led to the field, his face full of soot, his clothes singed, and tears forming clear grooves on his sun-weathered face.

-Again?!-said mom.

Dad didn't answer. She already knew the answer, the same one she had already given him many times before I was born. I learned that answer some time later, and it was something more like an epitaph than an explanation. Not even an excuse, just a reasonable question of principles that no one could refute from the point of view that the old man had, and yet everyone knew that it was unsustainable, just as it is unsustainable to keep a body standing that is not fed.

Because he said that the poor and malnourished land becomes thin like a man who only nourishes himself with green vegetables. The fact was that the vegetables ended the life of the earth instead of feeding it, so it became simple dust without the ability to procreate. The earth is like meat, it feeds and in turn creates. It is like muscle, it grows and moves, and by moving it sets in motion the mechanical and biological processes that create new sources of life.

And my mother was also partly to blame for that. He liked to read him passages from the Bible, fragments and verses from the Old Testament, so often mentioning fire. Fire is purifying, she said, fire destroys what is old and weak, and creates a clean and clear place, a climate and an environment where little by little, slowly, the seeds will settle, where the rain will fall.

Yes, my old woman had her part to blame, too, so she couldn't say more than what she always said: again!, and remain silent, contemplating the flames that advanced, destroying not only the failed crops, but also the humble and obedient children of the good harvest, always so scarce, difficult to obtain against the inclemency of the weather. The wind, although gentle, knows how to transport fire, and seems to have more fun than scattering seeds or bringing the clouds that will feed them. The wind has fun at the expense of the hearts of men, and enjoys obfuscating and exacerbating the boredom and fury in the chests that observe the incessant passage of the fire that drags and feeds.

I heard about that fire in the truck that she left us near Coronda. My old man's truck driver friend was talking to him in the cabin, where Raúl and I were also. I watched the early autumn showers, while they said that we had escaped with luck, because the owner of the fields lived in the city and would not find out about the fire until two days later. Between the afternoon the fire started and our departure, only half a day passed. So we had a day and a half head start, although we didn't know it yet then. My old man looked back with his head out the window, as if he could see if they were chasing him. It was the first time I had gone through that, but at night I heard Raúl and Pedro talking about the previous times, and I knew that the same thing always happened: the settlement, the time of planting, then the fire and the escape. The old man always looked back for a few days, but he left no traces other than the fire, and the fire has the commendable skill of leaving nothing behind, it erases everything, and like a protective god it hides between the black veils of its smoke. , the hands that created it.

I then understood that my old man felt protected by the fire.

Each start in a new town was a challenge that gave him strength, not because of the new place, but because he was on the way to something new, and as he was undoing and throwing the residue of fear on the roads, a smile was gaining ground. on his face, previously hidden by the beard that he had grown as a sign of sadness and failure. He became chatty and funny, patted us on the back and hugged us more often. He kissed my mother and got on her with so much care and attention.

So she was happy too, and we were even happier. My father was getting closer to being the man we would have liked to have as a father. But the memories of the gray times are like a mosaic, a checkerboard. We jump from one to another and lose irretrievable pieces.

6

It was an exceptionally cold August night. Since the afternoon we could see dark clouds that threatened rain, but at nine o'clock at night there was no rain, only the cold had intensified and the wind had increased, bringing icy gusts from the south. Dad returned from his sixth foray into the wheat field, and he came back with the same worried expression as the other five.

-There is nothing to do, the frost is going to rot the earth.

We had achieved a good harvest at the end of the summer, and we hoped the plants would survive the winter for next time. But according to what the radio announced, sleet and some brief snowfall were coming, enough, however, to kill the crops.

"It's exhausted land," said Dad, sitting down at the table, where a bowl of chicken soup was waiting for him.

Mom served with the ladle, and then passed the deep plate of metal dishes, blackened by use. Thunder was heard and two lightning bolts illuminated the interior of the little house. The two dogs we had at the time reacted differently to the thunder: the male hid under the table, trembling between our legs. Thus the female circled around, agitated and barking, sometimes howling. Clarisa was five years old and she played with the soup, tipping the spoon on the table when she tried to follow the dog's movements. Mom challenged her, but she had resigned herself to calmly endure her small domestic complications, because she saw something more important coming in the face of her husband. I still couldn't see it, but I think my older brothers had already noticed it. Especially Raúl, whose sad face was in complete agreement with the silence that he had decided to adopt as a response. Dad was waiting for him to say something, after all he was the eldest, and for a long time he had been his only assistant in the planting and harvesting tasks. Pedro had started with herding work, taking care of the horses, and shopping in town. I was the only one who went to school, three times a week. Near Coronda there was an old rural school attended by almost a hundred boys. It was the first time my family had settled so close to a school district, so my mother talked to Dad about his idea of sending me to learn. It was an opportunity, after all, that could make us stay longer than other times. But now, looking back on it, it turned out to be tremendous innocence on my mother's part. It was like holding the wind in one place, it was like controlling the fire, but you can only let it continue until it kills you.

My old man accepted, and the daily routine didn't change much. We knew that the change would not last long, or rather that strange lack of change that was our permanence in the same place for more than a few months. We enjoyed it in some curious way, aware that everything would soon end, but that didn't stop my brothers from making friends and getting a couple of girlfriends with whom they would hide in the fields to kiss, to touch each other in a way that I I didn't understand that time. It was no use for mom to warn them, she watched them wash and run away when they finished their homework in the field, and she looked at Clarisa and me as if we were still her babies.

"You stay with me," she told us.

We wouldn't lose her because someday she would go with us, when dad and the fire decided. The thing is that it wasn't him who forced us to leave the place this time, but the police. Two men opened the door with a single kick, and a third entered holding a gun.

-Don't move! -He said, pointing at us. The others followed him and also targeted us.

We sat as we were, at first more surprised than scared. When Clarisa began to cry loudly, my mother got up to comfort her and pressed her against her chest.

-I said don't move!

My father, who still had the spoon in his hand, looked at the police officers with an expression that he couldn't interpret. They didn't give him time to do anything. Two of them hit him while he was sitting and tied him to the floor. Dad's body pushed the table when it fell and the soup from each bowl spilled onto the table and dripped onto the floor. Our dogs barked together, excited, growling and baring their teeth at the intruders, all the while licking some of the soup that had fallen. I didn't dare look at my father lying there, drooling while he tried to speak, crushed by the police officers' knees. It was as if he knew that he didn't want to be seen like that, almost as if he were seen naked, skinny, pale and trembling. Absolutely unprotected by fire and abandoned by the earth. He would have wanted to die at that moment, perhaps, but the earth was under the floorboards and would not accept it, and the fire was a weak, servile flame in the kitchen.

Pedro had been staring at the intruders, with a look of hatred that I didn't know and that would be familiar to me ever since. Raúl had stopped as soon as they entered, but he remained still and looked at our father with immense pity, clear and overwhelming in his bright eyes. Already at that time he was beginning to look a lot like Dad, and I think he must have been seeing himself in the future. And there was also something else in his gaze, there was resentment. Later I learned that resentment can be stronger than hate, more persistent and stubborn, capable of doing things that hate would envy.

Then one of the dogs lunged at one of the police officers. He gritted his teeth on the arm that had the gun and didn't want to let go even though the guy screamed trying to get him off of him. One of the others hit the animal, but the one who seemed to be the boss did something much faster and more effective. He shot him.

Our dog, who had just been trembling under the table because of the thunder, was now dead on the floor, with half of his belly torn open by the explosion of the bullet. Clarisa screamed even louder. I kneeled next to the body. The female forgot the intruders and He began to circle around, licking my face, nudging me with his snout, sniffing his companion's corpse. He seemed to be telling me to do something to cure him. I was crying, I couldn't do more than that.

Pedro began to hit the police officer who had killed him. Mom yelled at him:

-Enough, Pedro, enough! -With tears that were barely visible, but her chin trembled as she tried to console our sister.

Raúl did not move. He observed each of the events without changing places. He was sweating, rubbing his forehead with the back of his forearm, licking the sweat on his upper lip, the short hairs that formed his budding mustache.

They took our father that night to the Coronda police station. The commissioner came, who deigned to look at the mess of thrown things, of spilled soup, the blood on the floor, the corpse of the dog that I refused to bury until the next morning. He had to listen to Clarisa's crying, which would not stop until dawn, and Pedro's insults, which he had to endure only because he was an eleven-year-old boy, before explaining to Mom what my father was accused of.

-An arrest warrant arrived this afternoon, lady. They are going to try him for arson of someone else's property. There are two complaints in Córdoba, they have been looking for him for a while...

Then he greeted Mom gently, but she limited herself to her usual silence. Afterwards, she shook hands with Raúl, who must have seemed older than his age because of his calm demeanor and his respectful compliance with authority. I looked at him and felt ashamed of my brother. But one makes a mistake when interpreting attitudes and looks. How far we are from knowing the people who are closest to us.

I was nine years old then. He still knew little and nothing about the bitter seeds that a man's heart cultivates.

Clarisa's cry was the same, but a little less shrill. This time it seemed more painful, because the previous time it was more similar to an attack of hysteria, that inability to stop crying that children feel when they see something that scares them. There is no point in explaining or trying to calm them down, they will continue until they get tired and fall asleep.

Now, however, when Pedro appeared back home after noon, carrying her in his arms, almost asleep and hugging her neck, I thought I saw the little sister I had seen crying in my mother's arms.

Just like that time, he found solace in the arms of her old woman, who cuddled her even though she was already five years old and they were planning to marry her. Pedro then took her to bed and the old woman stayed to take care of her.

"Heat some milk," she said to Raúl.

He obeyed and waited by the fire. Then she asked Peter:

-What she did?

Pedro was sitting, cleaning his nails with a splinter from the edge of the table.

-Cry and scream, what else was I going to do...

"We heard it..." I said.

She-she got crazy at first. It was difficult for me to reach it, but since I didn't know where we had buried him, he stopped for a moment and I grabbed it. Let go of me, son of a bitch, he told me. Pedro lowered his voice, looking askance at the corner where Clarisa's bed was. "The three of them are sons of bitches," he shouted, trying to get loose. If you stay still, I'll take you to see the grave, I told him. What a grave, a dog pit they made for him, he answered me. But she stayed still and I took her. She threw herself on the little pile of dirt and started crying, screaming and howling. After her I pulled her from her arms to tear her away, but she was stuck with her face and her entire body against the ground. Daddy, he said. Pedro imitated our sister's voice with contempt. "I felt like hitting her right there, whipping her until she didn't have the strength to get up." Stay with the old man now, he would have told him.

Pedro had gotten nervous and I saw that he had hurt his finger with the splinter.

-Why so much drama with the old man, if at the end of the day he knew him less than we did.

"She knew him for five years," I said.

"But he knew how to cajole her," said Raúl.

We looked at it and knew it was true. The old man's charm was indisputable when it came to women. But how he would have kept the old woman from abandoning him. He was not a womanizer, but he had a charm that was difficult to classify, it was more like he provoked a mixture of pity and love at the same time, and the curious thing is that both feelings survived without killing each other, as is customary. Pity is usually more insistent, less strong but more persuasive in doing the job of humiliating him. Grief is contradictory, beautiful and ugly at the same time, joyful and desperate. It's a finely wrapped gift hiding an empty box.

But Don Pedro Espinoza, with all his obstinacy so similar to evil, with all his failure on his back that he disguised as incorruptible human principles and ideals, knew how to prove the unconditional love of all of us.

His three sons venerated him throughout each of their lives. we follow him and we endured the rain, the fire and the flight of each town that we left behind a screen of smoke that hid our anguish and our shame. We were like a body whose head sometimes got lost in delusions that never completely departed from reality, as if its eyes saw future constructions, future buildings or crops in the desert. There they were, he saw them, like a new Moses dragging his people towards a place that only he could see, and of which he should not be very sure either.

The smell of boiled milk filled the house. Mom's complaint was heard and Raúl began to pour the milk into a cup. He took it to our sister and came back to clean up what had spilled on the wood-burning oven. It was an old metal oven that Father Macabeo had gotten us after asking about the surrounding rooms. A family from Le coeur antique, the neighboring town, was giving away old things and he let us know. The old man and I went to look for him. The town was strange, there were no trees in the surrounding area, and the big house of a family with a French surname was closed, on vacation in Europe, the priest told us. We were suspicious that any of those things abandoned in the patio of the house would be of any use, but the priest had been concerned about us and we could not refuse.

In the end, we put it to good use. The old man and Raúl repaired it. He had oven lids missing hinges, rust everywhere, and a leg was missing. But they borrowed a welder and set about fixing it. When he was ready, Mom stood in front of the oven, drying her hands on her apron and with a satisfied smile that I saw for the first time in my life. Dad opened the oven door and put the wood in, then he lit the fire and in half an hour the little house was abuzz.

"Thank you, Father," Mom had said to the priest, as if he had invented that device, as if he didn't know that the priest's insistence on us had other

intentions that we didn't know for sure, but above all that we didn't understand or didn't want to understand. .

And as they say that when you think of someone you are calling them, they knocked on the door.

It was Father Macabeo, with his faded cassock, his forty years on his back, stocky and with broad shoulders, blonde hair that was bordering on red and gray at the roots, a bald crown that he tried to cover by letting the little hair he had left grow long. more than usual for his job. He had blue, gray eyes, he only wore round glasses to read at mass.

"But what have they told me?" He said as he entered, looking at each of us more with surprise than anger. Without waiting for an answer, he went directly to where mom and Clarisa were.

-Father…

Mom got up and hugged him. She seemed to cry on the priest's chest, but I couldn't believe she was doing it. A second after her I saw her look up, limpid and cold, but she continued thanking him for her visit with complete condescension.

She was there for a while and then she looked at us. She moved her hands as if she were going to challenge ten year old boys.

-But how did that happen? Bury his father in the ground, like dogs. What kind of children are they? Or is it true what Dr. Ruiz told me this morning...

-And what did he tell you? -Peter said.

I should have imagined he would be the first to confront it. Since we had met him in Coronda, he had resented him. Father Macabeo was then the parish priest of the church, then we went and passed through several towns, until we ended up in Los Perros, and found the priest again, assigned here by the curia. Rumors said that he had been kicked out of Santa Fe some time after we left, although he had officially changed parish by appointment of the clergy. The truth was that he had fallen into disrepair, if the hierarchy of priests is measured by the number of parishioners and the size of their temple. I suppose it is so, because human affairs, although dressed in heavenly fabrics, always tend to be tempted by the fascination of numbers. There are wise men who assure that God has a name whose number of letters is such an exact and definitive figure that it cannot be known, because to know it would be to name one's own death, and with it the death of the world. Perhaps this is so, because Father Macabeo's inability to recruit new parishioners into his ranks was only comparable to his ability to make anyone feel guilty just by looking at them.

He had a very limited, but faithful and constant, parishioner; however, he did not stop visiting each neighboring town or visiting a new family to

gain followers. He was a busybody to some, almost a saint to those who saw him spend entire nights curing gangrene, or a philistine to others, who did not go to his church because they did not like his insistence on quoting the Old Testament.

Mom had also adhered to that custom. He saw in the old book a constancy that the gospels lacked. Jesus was a revolutionary, he was a boy in a man's body. A man in the path of a god. There could be no logic and sanity, only contradiction. And according to my father, the Eucharist was too light a dinner for that heavy heartburn that caused him when he returned home.

-They told me that you killed him.

Peter smiled.

-Are you waiting for confession, Father?

-Pedro! -Mom shouted.

-It doesn't matter, Doña Clotilde. Her children are big, they have grown a lot since we met in Coronda. They are men, and they have the right to think. His father, on the other hand, did not deserve this treatment. Burial in a holy place is a right of Christ. His father knew it and honored him.

Pedro approached him no more than ten centimeters away. They were the same height, but my brother was twenty years younger, with dark curly hair, thin and strong arms. I saw him raise his hands and tighten the collar of his cassock.

-You put that thing about the fire and the bush into the old man's head... -suddenly he didn't know how to continue, he was trembling.

-But Don Pedro had already been burning the fields before...

-To give strength to the earth, isn't it, old woman?

Mom pulled Pedro by her clothes to make him release the priest.

"Help," she told Raúl and me, but we didn't do it.

-Answer me, old woman!

-Yeah!

-But after you told him about Abraham and the fiery bush, about the sacrifice of his son, he didn't stop. He burned and left. You drove him crazy.

Pedro released the priest and began to push him towards the door. Father Maccabeus looked at each of us. No one, not even the old woman, tried to help him. We looked at him in turn without crying, without mercy, just as he had taught us the old patriarchs had no mercy. He an eye for an

eye, a tooth for a tooth. If a member of the body makes you hurt, cut it off. Obey the law of Jehovah: sacrifice your children if he asks you to.

Father Maccabeus stood at the entrance, under the radiant light of the afternoon. He was a dark figure with no interior details, only contours similar to volcanic stone. He fixed his cassock and walked away, followed by the dogs that sniffed him and barked, playing at tugging at the edges of his cassock. Until they left him alone too.

8

When they took dad away it was night. The old woman wanted to go, but they wouldn't let her.

-Tomorrow they are going to visit him, lady, if the judge allows visits. "Good night," said one of the police officers.

It was better this way, I think. Clarisa wouldn't stop crying and we wouldn't have known how to console her. I didn't move from next to my dog's corpse, and although his face was bathed in tears, I could see how the police officers picked up Dad with his hands handcuffed behind his back and disappeared into the night. Pedro ran after them but keeping his distance until just beyond the threshold of the door. Raúl had sat down and had his head hidden between his crossed arms resting on the table, and his fists clenched, tense.

"My God," Mom murmured, walking from one wall to another, interspersing cuddles and words that tried to console Clarisa.

-I knew this was going to happen one day, I knew it, I knew it...

It was the first time he had seen her so nervous, and he had never heard her talk so much before.

Pedro returned and she took it out on him.

-Do you want them to take you too?! "She," she yelled at him, hitting him on the head with her free hand. Clarisa began to cry more and she returned to dedicate herself to our sister. Pedro was furious, but he cried silently.

Afterwards I don't remember anything. Only I woke up in bed, hugging my brothers. In the morning we buried my dog, while the dog accompanied us. Mom stayed at home, Clarisa had a fever. Raúl dug the well, I wrapped the body in a blanket and dropped it there. The dog looked out, sniffed and

sat down to look at us. Pedro returned the earth to the well and I put a stone where I engraved my dog's name. Pancho, his name was.

That afternoon, just as he would do almost ten years later, Father Macabeo, younger, with almost all of his hair still on, wearing the same but newer cassock, appeared at our house, crossing the threshold with the broken door. He looked at what the police officers had done with an expression of slight superiority.

-I warned Don Pedro, those are not ways of living that he was leading... - he said, even before greeting us.

-Come in, Father.

Mom pulled out a chair for him. She put down a pillow, dusted it, and invited him to sit down. There were still blood stains on the floor and soup stains on the table. The priest looked at the ground.

-They didn't hurt him, Father, the blood is Pancho's. They killed him for defending the boss...

The priest looked at me, because he knew that the dog was mine rather than the family's. He shook my hair as I looked at him, standing next to the table. He smiled at me, I suppose out of kindness, but at that moment I wondered what he was smiling about.

My father was in prison, my dog was dead. my mother She was desperate, although she hid it, Pedro angry and Raúl closed in on himself as if he were in a bastion miles away. My sister was in bed, between fever and sobbing. And we hardly had anything to eat. The wheat was ready to be harvested, but we were not enough to do the harvest alone. If the weather got worse, we would lose everything.

-I come from town, Doña Clotilde. I saw her husband. Tell the boys to start harvesting, not to waste time. He tells you not to go see him, he will be out soon. They gave him a court-appointed lawyer, and hopefully he only serves three months.

Mom hugged the priest and kissed him.

-Just stop, Doña Clotilde, you're going to make me blush.

-You see, guys, Father Macabeo always brings us good news-she dried her tears and started heating hot water for some mate.

Then Father Maccabeus began to come twice a day. On weekends he stayed all afternoon after mass. Raúl and Pedro spent hours in the field, harvesting. Some neighbors came to help, but it was slow work. They came back tired, bathed and fell asleep almost without eating. At four in the morning they were back on their feet. I went to help them, even though mom didn't want to. The three of us left before dawn, and at noon we

returned to eat something. Then we would meet the priest sitting at the table, we would wash our hands and then we would sit down to bless the food.

Father Maccabeus looked at us, while he delicately lifted the fork, gently cut the meat or drank slowly. Every time he raised the glass, I saw him raise the chalice with the ostia, so I was ashamed to be eating at such a sacred table that the priest himself had blessed. But my vision at that time was not shared by my brothers, and later I also changed my mind.

After the first month, the priest offered to give us catechism lessons. We had sold the crop at a much lower price than we expected. It was a weak harvest, and we had managed to harvest only half of it before the rest was spoiled by a pest that began eating the crop a month before. Dad hadn't told us anything, and we only realized that he had kept Raúl, the only one who helped him until then, away from that area. When we entered the field shortly after he was arrested, we saw insects proliferating on the ears of wheat, consuming them with a sticky liquid that caused them to rot in a few days.

When we sold, Father Macabeo accompanied us to the town, to the forage market where buyers and the owners of the fields or their tenants usually met. If it hadn't been for the priest, who, even without saying anything, inhibited in a certain strange way the tough merchants, who tried by any means to buy at the lowest price. The buyers had their mental list of which were the best lands and which were the most skillful or sagacious peasants. My father had a bad reputation, and the land he worked was even worse than his reputation. Therefore, when word spread that his children were alone with what was left of the harvest, and that the eldest was only fifteen years old, they murmured phrases of satisfaction between mocking smiles. We didn't have much for them to take advantage of, nothing very valuable to strive for the most advantageous price. They simply acted as benefactors, as if they were throwing alms at us out of pity. Coins.

But if the priest had not been there, we would not have even obtained that.

Maybe because of that, or maybe he planned it before, or it was simply his good will, who knows, that then he believed he had the right to train us. He took us into his charge as students, since we had nothing else to do until the next crop, and that still remained to be seen, because dad's business did not seem to be going in the right direction.

One afternoon, Father Maccabeus gathered us outside the house. My mother cooked and Clarisa helped her with the simplest tasks, cleaning potatoes, sweeping the floor. My brothers and I sat on the grass-free land next to eucalyptus. The priest sat on one of the protruding roots, wiped the perspiration from his forehead with his sleeve and adjusted the skirt of his cassock between his open legs.

-I know you are not very believers, guys, but I am going to teach you some things so that you can see what benefits trusting in God brings.

He opened the Bible that he always carried in his pocket. He looked at us for a moment with the book open, he thought better of it and started talking to us.

-His father, boys, is a good man to you, but he is also a wrong man. He loves them, I'm sure, but he is leading them down wrong paths. Look where he's ended up, and we don't know for how long.

We looked at him in silence, without moving a muscle on his face. Raúl is He was squatting, barely willing to listen for a while because he had things to do. Pedro kneeling, back straight and arms crossed. I was lying on my stomach against the ground, my elbows on the ground and my head resting on the palms of my hands. It was hot, so the three of us were naked from the body up, refreshed by the breeze that ran through the eucalyptus branches and enveloped us with its aroma.

-His mother is tired, guys. She is still young enough to be supporting four children without help from her father.

-But dad is not dead...-said Pedro.

The priest looked at him, perhaps surprised by that interruption.

-I know, son, but you should consider it...

He looked at each of us for a moment, hoping to see something other than the cold reception that greeted his words.

-...absent for a long time. For his mother's sake, I tell you, and for yours. They should get away from their father now that they have the chance. They are going to send me in a few months to a parish near Esperanza. I have acquaintances. I offered to get your mother a little land to plant, and as they grow, you will take over.

A bark came to us from the house. Clarisa was laughing, playing with the dog. Father Maccabeus smiled as he watched her.

"Her little sister needs a better guide than her father," he said, and when he turned towards us again, he found Raúl, who without making a single noise had gotten up and approached the priest. Standing in front of him, she looked at him with resentment. It was like seeing our father, the same face shape with strong and delicate jaws at the same time, straight nose, brown eyes, pronounced eyebrows, wide forehead and wavy black hair barely combed to the left. He was also the same height, and as I said before, his body shape was exactly the same as what our father must have had when he was a teenager, and that he still remained almost unscathed despite the years. Dad was forty-three years old at the time, although a certain weakness and thinning gray hair made him look older. I imagined

him in a cell, sitting on the dirt floor, his back against the wall, his legs bent against his chest and his chin on his knees. Thinking, perhaps guessing what was happening that same afternoon in the lands from which they had taken him. Seeing, perhaps, with those eyes whose brown color was a mixture of the changing tones of time, a mixture of lands that the wind drags from place to place, the scene that we were experiencing at that moment.

"Let's wait for dad," said Raúl.

Father Maccabeus nodded, with a smile that seemed to me to be built like a house of cards. That's why it was soon erased when he said:

-Dear Raúl. You were his first child. For us, and even for the people of the city, the first child is more than a source of pride, I can't explain it better. Did you ever wonder why he didn't baptize you with his name? Why did Pedro name his second son?

Raúl stepped back and looked at Pedro, then looked back at the priest.

-And what do you know?

-We priests are confidants, son. I am your mother's confessor.

I doubted it was true, and if it was, I didn't think Mom would ever tell him many things about our family. I didn't think of it that way at the time, but it was like a certainty with no rational explanation yet.

-Things are said between husband and wife. Men talk to their wives at night. They say things as if they were talking to their mothers or their confessor priests. When your mother told him that you would come in nine months, he said he was happy. After that time, he continued to say he was happy. But he always had that look of surprise and fear when he looked at you. As if he were seeing himself. That was his biggest fear, I think. A pride that he did not allow himself to feel.

Pedro stood up, as if ready to confront the priest. He didn't dare say anything to him, but in his eyes I recognized the birth of his anger.

-You remember the story I told you about Abraham and his son. The old prophet would have undoubtedly sacrificed his son. God had asked him, and he trusted God above all things. It is a matter of unquestionable faith, but there is also the question of human nature. We are similar to God, but also similar to the devil. Pride is not always a sin, sometimes it saves us. But fear is the strongest bond of evil, we kill what we fear. When you were growing in your mother's belly, he knew that his fear of not knowing how to raise you was growing, the fear of fathering someone as terribly sad and destined to fail as him. He saw himself as if in a mirror. But fear is like a viper that coils itself in a circle until it eats itself, it feeds on its own fear. One ends up not killing oneself because one learns to live with one's own failures, they are sometimes sweet, they are like levers or ropes that move or prevent us. that

we fall. It helps, when we have nothing more than those few broken stones collected in the harvest. When you were born, there you were, the terrible object of their fear, the vibrant mirror of the future. Giving you his own name would have been too much for his poor cowardly heart.

Pedro jumped on him. He was barely a boy, so Father Maccabeus held him pressed against his body like an angry puppy, until his confusion passed. He endured the kicks and punches that Pedro gave him, and they did nothing but make the priest's strong body smile.

Raúl was crying.

I didn't know what to do, doubting whether what I had just heard had been reality or a dream. Now that I remember that monologue, I'm not sure if it was delivered that way or if I added my adult words to the apocalyptic and dark sermon that Father Maccabeus had accustomed us to.

9

On the night of the day we buried our father, Mrs. Valverde arrived. She came in when we were having dinner. My brothers and I had started talking about what to do about growing sunflowers. We didn't have any experience with that type of crops, so we had to consult the town first. But then Mrs. Valverde arrived, fat, with rosy cheeks and smooth as an apple. She was over fifty years old, but she enjoyed enviable agility. Her straight white hair was long, although she kept it up with more than ten barrettes, and her eyes were green, a color that her son had also inherited from her.

"But Clotilde..." she said, joining her hands in front of her breasts, as wide as her entire body. She wasn't tall, so her fat was distributed like an inflated balloon. - Why didn't you tell me before...

She lived five kilometers away. Her small ranch retained a certain economic brilliance despite running it without help. She was a widow very soon after giving birth to her only child. Gustavo Valverde was a strange, lonely guy who experimented with baby animals. Not long after, he would have problems with the gendarmes and would go to La Plata with his girlfriend. I think he became a pharmacist, I was told later. But at the time I'm telling him he was still living with his mother.

-I know what it feels like, since I lost my man the only consolation is my son, and you already know the problems he brings me...

Mom looked at her out of respect, but she didn't seem to hear her. Mrs. Valverde continued speaking, continuously and uninterruptedly for more

than two hours. It was almost eleven at night and it was very dark inside the house. We didn't have electricity, and since Mom didn't want us to light the oil lamps, only the moonlight shone through the window on the table next to which she and her neighbor were still talking. Mom responded in monosyllables, with her gaze lost in the white light that illuminated the grain of the wood. Did she see, perhaps, soup stains? Would she remember the same thing I remembered at the same moment? I wouldn't be surprised if she suddenly made a gesture to push away the flies, just as she had done with those that were circling Clarisa's crying face the day Dad was arrested. But tonight there were no flies, and she turned to look at my sister, who was sleeping in her bed.

-How is she?

Mom looked at Mrs. Valverde again.

-How did she take it, the poor thing? She was very fond of her father.

-You see, my friend, she was crying all day until she fell asleep. She didn't want to eat anything.

-And do you know what happened to her? Was it just like that, all of a sudden?

Mom looked out the window. Raúl and Pedro were talking outside, I was lying down but awake.

"The countryside killed him, I imagine," said Mom.

-Like everyone, dear, like everyone sooner or later.

It was the last thing Mrs. Valverde said before she left. She walked past my brothers and said something to them, condolences, I guess. But she was distant, perhaps they had told her what Dr. Ruiz suspected.

I heard Mom washing her face in the basin, then her clothes sliding in the darkness a few meters from me. Her bed was against the wall opposite the window through which the moonlight came in. The shadow of my brothers moved hugely over the floor, until it reached the sheets. My mother went to bed, I heard the mattress squeak. When the noise stopped, I heard my mother's suppressed crying. She hadn't cried all day, and I thought she never would. And that seemed fine to me: why she needed to cry for a man who did nothing but give her problems that would never have a solution other than disappearing under the ashes that the whole family left behind when they moved from town to town. Problems and fire were a more than effective formula for my old man, it was a revelation of holiness that had been revealed to him perhaps in a dream, or in some vigil where insomnia had the virtue of making one see the auras and anticipating with prophecies the future of the facts and the fate of time. Later I will say when and how I

thought I saw him reading those mystical prayers in the lines of the winter sky over the newly cultivated fields.

But tonight I was thinking about the reason for my mother's crying. Why would a woman stronger than hers, her man, and all of her children, his men, need to mourn the loss of the one who did nothing but dull the brilliance that she could have revealed on her own. A woman is a mystery. A cave and an ocean, wide and deep like them. If my mother had listened to Father Maccabeus' sermons, and she transmitted them to Dad, it was surely not with the intention that he would distort the teachings of the Old Testament according to his own peculiar interpretation. An interpretation that we would later learn to have a consistency as rigid as the logic of a dry mud wall. She spoke to him each Sunday night about the Bible verses that had been chosen at the day's mass. I listened to them from my bed, the same way I heard the suppressed moans so many times when they made love. But when she spoke, she did not do so with pleasure, but with a slight touch of sad irony, as if she were saying that God had written a book too beautiful to be credible, so full of fantastic episodes that those heroes did nothing but intimidate and oppress. the imagination and love - which are sometimes the same single redeeming substance - of contemporary men. How to compete with them, she told my father, who was listening next to her, without saying anything, other than nodding with a movement of his lips, ready to let himself be dominated by the force of sleep and the tremor of his usual snoring. My mother spoke of heaven deposited on earth by the hands converted into phrases and words of those who wrote the Bible. My father listened from the human bed of his bed, the only human instrument more like a tomb.

They would stay talking until two in the morning, even though he would have to get up at four to work the fields, and so would she, but to prepare breakfast, milk the cow, feed the chickens and avoid that thought that hit her like a stone on the temple, that constant and incorruptible idea that her man was not, despite everything, a failure, a poor guy who had done nothing more than father strong children and keep for himself a weak but singularly beautiful for a man as virile as him. The thought she told him that a man is not a dross thrown from the soles of God's boots, but an instrument, a jewel that must be polished to remember the essence at the center of it. Only fire could cover the surface with smoke, but not the center of a precious stone. Because bright stones are, like the stones of an infertile field, products of the earth.

"The brambles, Pedro," her mother told him before making a silence that was like a balm to my ears. The brambles are the language of God.

In the morning, Lisandro arrived to take Clarisa.

They met on a Sunday ten months earlier, when we passed by Le coeur antique for the first time. We had just arrived in Los Perros and we found out that Father Macabeo made courtesy visits in the neighboring town to attract parishioners. There was no church there, nor did he hope to convince them to travel almost thirty kilometers every Sunday to go to the church of Los Perros, but he continued to insist. Mom wanted to go visit him, since we hadn't seen him since we left Coronda. And then we crossed paths in the town square with a family that had a ranch nearby, the Gonçalvez. They were people with money, they told us. The relatives from Buenos Aires were partners in a waste collection company, and also in a funeral home. But the family seemed simple and kind. They had come in a new van to spend the day in town. The mother was a thin lady with sun-tanned skin, fine manners, and simple and distinguished features. The man was burly, with broad shoulders, mustaches and a thick beard, eyes green like the grass that covered the town cemetery. The son's name was Lisandro, a twenty-year-old boy, tall and very similar to his father, with short but very curly and dark hair.

He and Clarisa's gazes crossed and they immediately exchanged greetings, then words, then seemingly innocent games, light pushes, excuses for brief friction that time prolonged and turned into a kind of love that my brothers and I had never known. Then I will talk about our relationships with women, now it is time to talk about Clarisa and the way she abandoned us. Because this morning was the last one we spent together, the last time the family slept under the same roof. It's funny, my father wasn't there the night before, and yet I didn't think about it that way. Maybe the old man had disappeared before we buried him. Somehow, your

Death was not a death, but the disappearance of a corpse that for some time before, and against all logic, had been dragging the living instead of allowing itself to be dragged.

The living are the puppets of the dead. Some are already dead even though they still look alive. They are like Christ, it seems to me. They carry a shadow at their side, like everyone else, but they have focused on that shadow since they were born. She talks to them and they listen. They do not understand, but they listen as one who hears the sound of the wind that grows and advances, bringing the smell of rain, the leaves cruelly torn from the trees, and later the hurricane hands of a tornado lift us from the earth as a symbol incontestable, irreversible of our end.

Thinking about it this way, my brothers and I have done nothing more than be gravediggers. Lift a dead body and take it to bury in a secluded place, far from noise and near the dense perfume of rotting flowers. Only in that smell are we able to sink without a fight or resentment, it is an ocean of

thick, calm waters that receives us like the soft hands of a mother or father who still does not know what will come: the fear of the future installed in that present. intact and enormous like a universe enclosed in an almost transparent skin: the newborn child, the son who has begun to die, without knowing it.

No one will tell you yet, perhaps they will never tell you, because such things are not talked about.

That is why death is not understood by those who, like my sister, have a clear and light mind like the water of a stream that gathers in a clearing in a forest. His vision of things is so clean and superficial, so ethereal, that he would not have been able to see our old man's shadow even if the largest sun had been located next to him to demonstrate that a shadow is more than a negative reflection, it is a companion, a lover who abandons us when we go to bed, whether in sleep or in death.

Clarisa saw Lisandro enter while we were drinking mate sitting at the table. Mom was standing in front of the wood stove, waiting for her to boil the milk. Pedro had just washed and was in long underwear. Raúl was barbecuing and I had the mate in my right hand.

My sister ran to him and they hugged. She had her old cotton nightgown, clean and long. She didn't like her because she made her look old, but she kept her warm on winter nights. Now she didn't seem to suffer from the cold nor did she have the tremors with which she had woken up a while before. Soon she would have someone to take care of her without fear or fear. Someone who would lie down next to her and cover her body with her own body. It must not have been easy for Clarisa to grow up and become a woman with three male brothers. In recent times we had noticed her becoming more and more distant, more distrustful, as if each of us were a rapist. I don't know where she got those ideas from, I don't know how she could have imagined such things, unless Father Maccabeus had once spoken to her. Would she have told him to be careful, not to provoke us, that every man is an animal that does not know how to control the release of the semen that he produces without realizing it, like a prehistoric animal, like a compulsive murderer?

Maybe it's true if the priest said it, he'll know something about all that. I would only know that he was right some time later. When the family was no longer a family, when Pedro killed his own brother and I was responsible for my son's death. But I'm getting too ahead of myself.

This morning Lisandro arrived with his Ford truck, parked among a cloud of dust raised when parking in front of the entrance. He must have reached eighty kilometers per hour, he barely realized what had happened. He wasn't going to wait for Clarisa to grow up. We all read it in his face. Mom knew it even before my sister got up from the table to hug him.

"I'll take her, Doña Clotilde," he said. He considered maintaining a certain respect only for her old lady, although from the look on his face he didn't seem even willing to grant it to her. As for us, he avoided looking at us until it became necessary.

Pedro ripped Clarisa from her arms and pushed her against a chair. Lisandro jumped on top of her and they started fighting. Raúl tried to separate them, but he only managed to get them out of the house. Mom was also trying to separate Pedro. Clarisa came out after us and we were all outside now.

-He is a minor, son of a bitch! -Peter said.

-You guys are shit! Murderers! I'm not going to leave her here to be killed too!

Mom stopped struggling and grabbed Clarisa.

-Daughter, please.

They stopped and listened to what my sister was trying to say through her tears.

-They killed him! Do you understand, mom? And you hide them.

Mom slapped him on the cheek. Clarisa looked at her with big, scared eyes, then she ran towards Lisandro. She pushed Peter, saying:

-Cum, son of a bitch... -and she protected herself in the arms of her boyfriend. -I'm leaving, mom. I hate them do. They killed daddy!

Raúl grabbed Clarisa by the arm, and surprised me. Always so calm, this outburst of contained anger was unusual for him. Clarisa looked at him and I think she understood what he wanted to say to her in silence. Dad is already dead, she told him with her eyes, he has arrived at her sunflower field. You helped him sow them more than us, even if you did nothing more than bring him lunch and accompany him, you helped him keep the strength of his fury, the anger of his failure and the resentment born of his fears at the right point: the birth of the flowers that look at the sun. Because the sun is fire and will burn the flowers that look at his executioner every day of his life. You prevented him from ending up killing us, at least me, his firstborn. Only I was destined for sacrifice.

Abraham and his son.

God and Jesus Christ.

Scarecrows crucified in the field.

Lisandro took off his jacket and covered Clarisa. She hid her face in her boyfriend's chest, hugging him around the waist as if he were going to leave her at any moment. But nothing further than this, he was willing to take her

with him forever, and somehow we all knew that we would never see Clarisa again.

He put her in the truck and said:

-Today I'm sending a laborer to get his things. Don't even think about coming looking for her or I'll send the police, damn it!

And after shouting this warning, the truck took off among clouds of dust, hiding the scrawny, complaining and small figure of our barely seen sister behind the window.

Mom couldn't take it anymore and she started crying. The funny thing is that she grabbed me by the shoulders and hung around my neck. I felt her trembling and the pungent smell of her tears. I was her baby now, I thought at the time. And I just met Raúl's gaze. I felt his resentment more clearly than I saw the morning sun. For several years Raúl had become transparent as he stopped expressing himself with words. Of course, you had to have lived with him for a while to know his expressions, the slightest gestures on his face, the position of his hands, the unsaid words in the midst of long paragraphs of irreproachable and serene logic.

Why did he say that look to you? Why don't you hug me, I'm the oldest. I'm the man of the house now, mom. Because? It was the same thing I thought I heard the time Dad gave me the shotgun two years ago. They had given him that used shotgun in exchange for some pesos they owed him for a job. He appeared one night with the shotgun on his shoulder, followed by the dogs and with his face full of that smile that he saved for good harvests, and that is why it was so infrequent.

"Look, guys..." he told us, and the three of us approached to see and feel the weapon. It was old and had rust stains.

Raúl grabbed her in his hands, observed her with expert gestures, which he was not and could be seen in her exaggerated boasting. Pedro took it from him and rested it on his shoulder, pointing where Raúl was. Then dad snatched it away and surprised them both, saying:

-Take it, Nicanor, now that you're a man, you deserve it.

I was shocked, Pedro protested and went walking with the dogs. But the one who worried me was Raúl, because he looked straight at dad, and I thought for a moment that he would start crying. His eyes shone, his lips opened a little to say something and then he regretted it. He put his hands in his pockets and sat down. I took the gun and told my brother:

-Look, Raúl, she's hot, right? Can you help me clean it? Are we going to practice tomorrow?

He looked at me and I knew forever that he was no longer just my older brother. He was a man who looked at another man with infinite resentment.

I suddenly remembered Father Macabeo and that afternoon under the eucalyptus tree. The father's name had been denied him, as was the most important gift to a man. He worked with the old man since he was ten years old, he loaded and unloaded the truck, when we had one, during each move. He had lit the torches that were then passed into Dad's hands, because it should be the old man who started the fire, not anyone else. Nor his son, even if it were the first.

The firstborn was the blessing and the curse. The future and the irrecoverable past. Success and failure combined, walking together, canceling each other out. Touching him meant loving him and losing him. Talking to him was like tying a wire that could only be cut to separate them. If he had to sacrifice him, it was better to avoid gifts, which after all are symbols of words that cannot be said from one man to another. Symbols of symbols that precariously express what perhaps one is feeling for the other.

And if one sees oneself in that other, if one hates oneself, knowing that later one will have to sacrifice-expel-uproot the deep roots of anger and the bitter smells of frustration buried in one's own heart, the best thing is to ignore. Stop looking at the exact limit from the love-hate zone, the conflict zone where those who neglect themselves always lose a part of themselves.

Because a child, if he is also the first, is also a member of our own body. A severed fragment that we will miss with painful desperation for the rest of our lives. A piece of anger taking its own form, growing and becoming too similar to its origin.

And that is too intolerable, especially if what one hates about oneself is more than what one loves.

eleven

All day we stayed at home with Mom, waiting patiently for her to ask us to take her to where the old man was buried. But after she left Clarisa, she fell onto the bed. An hour later, she got up, washed her face, and changed from her nightclothes to the dress she wore to mass. It wasn't Sunday, however, so we suspected she was going out into town.

We were sitting around the table, sharing glances and suspicions. We didn't know what we would do if she left on her way to town. We didn't even want to think about it. But mom started preparing lunch. She filled a pot with water and set it to boil. Then she put the rice in and waited for it to be ready. She came and went from the kitchen to the table, bringing plates and bread, but without looking at us and in complete silence. Then she served

the dishes abruptly and quickly with the ladle, as if she were the cook of a prison and was serving inmates with reluctance and bad humor.

"If you want to see the old man..." Raúl began to say.

She didn't let him finish, she slapped him.

-Just you...so similar...

I don't know why she used those words, if they were spontaneous or planned, if they wanted to express something other than the simple façade of fury they denoted. She didn't sit with us, she went back to the kitchen and stood eating a piece of bread. I thought she was waiting for us to finish eating, but she immediately walked past us and left. Before we knew it, she had run a hand through her hair. It wasn't a blow, although she tried to be one, but a rough caress, perhaps more sincere than one done gently. It was like a gust that passed through the house for an instant, ruffling our hair and causing a chill followed by a warm feeling of abandonment. Something as if they had been the years that passed, dragged in the air by closed fists on the gray locks that time usually combs.

Pedro got up and followed mom with his eyes, standing at the door. She had not taken the road to the town, but rather the road to the countryside, but we were still suspicious.

-What if she goes to talk to the commissioner? -He said.

"He's not going to do it," I said, and they both looked at me as if I were someone else, the same but older. Instead of me becoming the youngest in the family now that Clarisa was gone, she had made me older. I would have liked to tell them that that's what happens when you wrap your own father's body in a burlap bag, load it into the back of a pickup truck, and then carry it on your shoulders. That happens when one digs and mistreats the earth so that it leaves free passage for those whom the same earth expelled with contempt long before. One grows, or rather transforms into something that we do not want to see in mirrors, when we let the dead take care of themselves, getting used to the silence that we imagine is eternal, and while we think, with the shovel on our shoulder and with our backs to the earth always restless about the past, that life is a bone that we gnaw like dogs accustomed to hunger, a dry and white bone, which turns out to be a part of our own skeleton.

One, finally, must grow to be the father of his father, because he who kills, even with thought, acquires a dimension similar to that of he who engenders.

In the afternoon we went to town. It was not time for harvest sales. Winter was not over yet. The sunflowers had survived by chance, so to

speak, and if Dad didn't pick them sooner it was because of that obsession that in recent months had dominated him more than ever. We tried for a while to convince him to seek expert advice. Let him see how he could sell the best possible to the oil manufacturers. But he didn't want to, and Raúl and Pedro resented him to the point of confronting him several times at home and on the field. He had spent the little we had on that crop. Before arriving at Los Perros we were able to sell a good crop of potatoes in Bragado. We had money and there was no need to burn anything, neither to hide the failed crops nor to renew the land on which we had settled. They were always abandoned lands, perhaps confiscated and forgotten by changing governments, more concerned with political vicissitudes than with maintaining old, exhausted and worthless lands. They were passed from hand to hand as if they were toys, when it was the men who moved on them. It's funny how perspective changes and no point of view becomes more real. to which another. The earth sees us as ants, we see it as a servant who can be raped on many occasions. When we manage to impregnate her, she gives birth to healthy children a few times, then her children are sick, deformed and murderous.

The land and dad had a complex relationship. He returned and she received him, he killed her and she returned. The earth loved him but she gave him ugly and bad children. He insisted, however, on growing flowers that face the sun. He offered flowers to his long-time lover always devoted to his feet. That's why he didn't want to deprive her of flowers that winter.

In the town, we left the truck in front of the forage shop. There were a couple of neighbors savoring their pipes at the door. They greeted us in silence, still looking at us like weirdos.

"Good afternoon," Raúl said to Don Jacinto, the owner.

"Hello," answered the other.

Raúl rested his hands on the counter, Don Jacinto looked at those hands from time to time, glancing over my brother's shoulder to see what Pedro and I were doing.

-You know, Don Jacinto, that my old man grew sunflowers. He had no experience, and neither did we. We are going to collect them but we need to know what price to sell at.

There were two men and a woman that we knew by sight. They were listening more attentively than usual in towns like that. It was evident that Dr. Ruiz had spoken to almost everyone, and the rumor had spread with a fertility greater than any man could have wished for his crops.

-I don't know how to tell you, guys. If I were you, I would take the old woman, pick up my things and leave.

He wiped the counter with a cloth, as if Raúl's hands had dirty it. He turned to continue with his things, sorting spare parts, preparing orders. For a moment I thought Raúl was going to grab him by his clothes to hit him, but I realized that the sadness was greater than the anger. I knew how to read in my brother's eyes that there is an inheritance that sometimes comes along with physical appearance, other times not, but in his case he seemed to be part of a circle. He was turning around after 180 degrees. He returned to the point of origin and far away, at the same point of his birth, old Don Pedro Espinoza was waiting for him, with another name, but a name was not necessary to constitute an essence.

Raúl saw the fire, then, at the end of the road. Like ten or twenty years before, a man and his family were leaving, leaving a field devastated by flames that tried to erase the traces of a failure that gave every sign of being predetermined centuries before. Thinking this and seeing Father Macabeo enter the business were almost the same event. He greeted everyone and put a hand on my shoulder.

-Hello Nicanor, how is your old woman?

"More or less," I answered. He smiled and patted me on the back.

-I always liked you, Nicanor.

Pedro looked at him angrily but did not dare to do anything. Raúl left the warehouse. The rest of us left and the priest accompanied us. Raúl got into the truck and drove off at full speed. Pedro ran him a few meters, then he put his hands in his pockets, looking at the priest and me, then he walked to the bar.

-I would like to talk to you, Nicanor. You seem more reasonable to me than your brothers.

I shook my hand off his back, as if he had wronged me.

-Okay, I don't want to offend you. I know you love them very much. But you have to be reasonable and not act like criminals. They are doing a lot of damage to your old lady, do you realize?

He didn't wait for me to answer, he gently grabbed me by the elbow and made me accompany him to the church. It was a chapel more than a church, really. It had an oval arch, a staircase of ten steps, a bell tower in the only central tower, no taller than a Carolina poplar. There was always a musty smell inside, not even the incense that the old saint in charge of cleaning could overcome. The altar cross was on a wall covered in mold, and the images of the saints and the stations of Calvary were incomplete, broken and dirty. For a time, they told us, they had been stealing the only valuable things in the church, the silver chalices, the marble statue of the virgin. When there was nothing left but the wood of the benches and the cement altar, the priest before Father Macabeo had chosen to replace those

objects with cheap ones, made of ceramic or clay, he had even ordered a complete series of the Calvary to be brought from Buenos Aires. Made of plastic and acrylic.

When we entered, I saw those paintings hanging from the side walls, bright colors but already dull, the plastic worn by the devoted hands of the parishioners. We walked among them to the small door that would be behind the altar. It was oval framed, made of thick wood, with a single old lock and two recently added bolts. Maybe Father Maccabeus had them installed. Er to the only beautiful thing in that church, the ancient door, which despite its dull shine and rustic elegance, seemed like a relic rescued from time. Its hinges resonated when I opened it, and I thought I heard then the chorus of the masses of yesteryear, at the old Sunday noons, when the town was not just that, but an incongruous accumulation of country people gathered by a common and Christian rite, happy rather than sad. I also thought I heard the screams and the children's play outside, entering when the doors opened after the ceremony, next to the sun that clears the funereal shadows of the rite and drives them away to where they belong, their confinement in the chalice and among the shadows of the eyes of Christ on the cross.

I saw the sunlight flood the central aisle between the benches, and I walked outside with my imagination, eager to play with the others on that immemorial Sunday afternoon, which last as long as life, until the sun goes down and the cold announces the end of things with a sorrow that grows in the chest of every boy and every dog. The trees participate in that death with their enormous shadow and their cold under the branches.

And I see, at the end of the afternoon, the caranchos flying over the fields, covering them little by little with the shadow of their wings. As if sowing cold and death, night and silence, on the earth.

Father Maccabeus invited me to sit down. It was a narrow room where he lived. One entire wall was covered with shelves with books, on another there was a table and two chairs. Next to it was a door that I imagined led to the bathroom. Another door, just a little further away, must have led to another smaller room where he slept.

-Do you want a glass of lemonade? Doña Gervasia just did it for me.

-No, Father.

-Yesterday they didn't let me speak, so listen to me carefully. I don't want to give you a lecture, we have known each other for many years.

I waited for the inevitable question, I tried to read on his lips the only thing I was interested in hearing: the question. Everything he started to say I thought I hadn't heard, although it turned out otherwise, as I realized shortly after leaving the church.

-You know that your father and I became friends. Maybe you don't remember, you were very young. He didn't go to church much, but your mother did, and she served as a bridge between us. Sometimes I would go visit him in the field, while you were at home or your brothers were working. They saw us talking, sitting between the furrows, watching the crops grow. Ask them if you don't believe me. But there are things I can't tell you about him because no one knew him in depth, not even your mother, and she only did it out of intuition, I imagine.

-But my old man didn't believe...

-And that has to do? To be a friend of a priest, is it essential to believe in God? For some it may be, for your old man it was not like that.

He moved his chair closer to where I was and leaned his body, as if he were going to whisper a secret in my ear.

-He was my friend, it's true, but after he was arrested he got angry with me, I don't know why. I wanted to direct them to you. I saw Don Pedro in jail for a long time and you in misery, that made me furious. Your mother didn't deserve it. I'm going to tell you something that not even your brothers know, and I think Clotilde doesn't know either. Before Raúl was born your grandmother was still alive. At that time they had a farm on the outskirts of Venado Tuerto. Your father was an only child, and since your grandfather was killed one night in the middle of the field when he was eight years old, he had to become the man of the house. The old woman was very fat and she could barely move, but she managed to maintain the farm with what she earned as a fortune teller. Then your parents met and Clotilde became pregnant with Raúl. What she wanted to tell you is this: when it was two months before he was born, your father spent an entire night away from home. It was raining, he told me, the roads were impassable and the fields were flooded. The mother was sick, and she visited her almost every day. That night she decided to stay at her parents' old farm. Then her mother read her fortune. She had never done it with his family, a matter of superstition, I guess. But the old woman was about to die, she had a fever, and maybe she was afraid of not surviving that night. Your father had sat next to the bed, looking at her mother, huge, overflowing from the edges like a bag of potatoes.

“Hand me the bone,” he told your father. He went to look for it in the drawer where he kept it. It was a dead man's bone, a heel bone. It's the one she used to tell the future, according to what she said. When he handed it to her, she put it in her mouth and closed her eyes. Your father was used to that, so he wasn't surprised. To him that was his mother's job, and he hadn't thought about whether she believed it or not. But when she spit the bone onto the bed, her eyes were wide and her expression of fear had never been there. I had seen him, except, perhaps, the night the gendarmes brought the old man's body. The bone bounced off the bed and fell to the floor next to your father's feet.

“What's wrong, old lady,” he asked. She looked at him, and with that abrupt animosity of fat people she pressed his face between her hands, clumsily pampering him, and she began to cry. Your father asked her several times what he had seen, but she refused to answer him.

When dawn broke, he had almost forgotten about it, and when she approached the old woman's bed, she was already dead. He closed her eyelids and covered her with the sheets. As he moved the chair where he was sitting he hit the dead man's bone. At that moment he felt that something was happening to his wife. He saw her standing, with her belly heavy, next to her window, looking at him in silence, as if from afar, as he really was. He said he saw her reach out and ask for her help. Something was wrong with the unborn boy. There were two months left but he felt that his wife was going to give birth. Then he left his mother's house, got on a horse and rode through muddy fields, across flooded fields, and came to his house. Clotilde was up, drinking mate.

“I didn't expect you, so early with this rain. “How is your mom?” she asked him. Your father was stunned, shook his head and sat down.

“I was thinking all night about a name for the baby,” she told him, “I hope it turns out like you.” Then he knew what his mother had seen. He remembered the old woman's face when she spit out the bone, and he no longer had the courage to hope for a future better than the past.

There is nothing supernatural in that, it seems to me, I would have told Father Maccabeus when he finished. Life is a circle. Parents and children do nothing but circle around each other, looking at each other and hating each other to the exact point where everything begins again, where love is renewed without knowing what it is destined to become.

Father Maccabeus let me go by giving up knowing what he wanted. That question that I had waited with fear, but sometimes fear, as it happened to my father, is an oracle, a crack that breaks the surface of everyday life and ventilates, in addition to revealing, the sad and humid recesses of the celestial framework. . Then it occurred to me that God's heart must be like that bone of my grandmother. But I didn't tell the priest, he gave me the impression that, if he had heard it, he would have started crying. I didn't want that, yet.

With my brothers, we would later make other plans for him.

I walked home, thinking about what the priest had told me. I thought of my mother, so hopeful when she met my father, so proud surely. She could not fully understand that fear that Father Macabeo attributed to the old man. How could a man, I wondered, at eighteen years of age, be afraid of having children. Then I corrected myself, as a fool I had misunderstood. The fear she felt was towards his son, whoever she was, whatever she looked like. But perhaps he sensed, or knew with those certainties that our lucid mind will never dare to openly recognize in the light of day, that his first child, like the firstborn of any man, would not be just a coincidence, a convergence of factors taken random by the unclassifiable laws of time and inheritance, but the most exact extension of himself. Every man is a rehearsal of God, and like God himself, man rehearses by generating. There are mistakes, until he learns not to make them again. The first child is the mirror of oneself, then we will perfect the products. There will never be a totally perfect last product, but we will get closer. Was it possible, I wondered, that Dad considered Clarisa, his last daughter, to be the most perfect product, because she was the last. If it's because of the affection he showed her, that's how it should be.

I began to walk more slowly that afternoon when the winter sun gave a merciful warmth to the cold air. It had only been a day since we had buried dad. I dragged the soles of my boots along the dirt as I walked, deliberately slowing down, lingering on the thought of Raúl. My older brother, the most exact reflection of my father. And I realized that this is how it should always be. A younger brother will always be the younger. The figure of the first-born, even if he is kind and not authoritarian towards his siblings, is always powerful. There is nothing that we should not consult with him, there is nothing that we do not have the slightest suspicion that he may not like. There will be things that we must hide from him for fear of his disapproval. Because sometimes more than the father, whose representative he is and to whose authority he is also subject, he must be rigid, not only for fear of being challenged for failure to fulfill his duty, but because inexperience and youth produce insecurity translated into unbribable attitudes where there is no forgiveness or mercy. Only the father, like God, can allow himself to condescend to c certain weaknesses of his subjects, because he is the bestower of mercy.

Raúl was becoming more and more like our old man. As much as he didn't want it, he was following his path. He should no longer sense it, but know it. The almost concrete impossibility of profiting from the sunflower plantation had caused his silent fury that afternoon. If it wasn't destiny, I told myself, it would be Dr. Ruiz who would prevent us from selling. There are men who are instruments, who were born to be powerless attorneys and attorneys, just machines that take others to certain places and abandon them there. They are machines that process the soul and body of their victims, and deposit them in barren wastelands, where smoke is the only curtain separating the punishment from the sun and insects are tiny instruments of torture. Places where there are no mirrors, where there is no

father-god to come and rescue us. Like a drink of acidic water in the desert, we discover that our parents were those instruments, those machines, that once, a long time ago, went away with their bronze feet, their caterpillar feet like war tanks, their dilapidated structure. where the feeling grows and dies like the seasons throughout the year.

I saw the old truck when I got home, so similar to the image I had just had. That's why Raúl had been awarded its almost exclusive use, in line with my ideas, fitting perfectly into the diagram of the puzzle that was being put together in my mind.

Mom was in the garden, taking care of her small vegetable plantation.

"Where did you go, old woman?" I asked her.

-You know, Nicanor. I had a hard time finding it, but in the end I did. It's surrounded by flowers, son, that's nice. Who had the idea?

I should have told him that that wasn't the idea, that no one had thought of the flowers precisely as an offering, but it didn't matter. My old lady, as women usually do, almost always, they are capable of going from austere judgment to extreme forgiveness in a short time. They see flowers where there was once frost.

"From Raúl," I answered.

She looked at me as if I didn't miss her, but at the same time surprised. Was she, perhaps, rediscovering her eldest son? Would she be seeing him the way she saw her husband?

I then remembered a day when my brothers and I were playing outside the ranch where we lived two years after leaving Coronda. It was a town without a name, or at least I don't remember it, we were there for just two months, and the pumpkin seeds that dad planted were abandoned already dead. A plague of flies was the result of the hottest summer we experienced at that time, flies that settled in the fields and prevented us from working, they seemed to bite the skin and left large welts that sometimes oozed. Clarisa got sick because of that, she had a fever and mom was worried. There was no way to get a doctor. The old man left the field, forgot to water the damned pumpkins and went in search of a doctor in a larger town, almost fifty kilometers away. We had no vehicle other than an old white sorrel with tea and milk stains. He was older and not very fast. Dad took two days to go and come back, he returned in the doctor's truck, now without the sorrel. He had had it put down by the vet back in town. Pedro looked at him when he said it, but before he started to complain, because he loved the horse very much, he heard Clarisa's screams and ran to hide his sorrow in the exposed helplessness of the field, surrounded by the unbearable flies of that summer. The doctor checked my sister and drained the abscesses. He gave us some samples of antibiotics and told Mom that she should treat her wounds once a day.

And while Clarisa was healing, dad prepared things for our departure. He had figured out where to go, so he was all set. All that was left was to hope that my sister was okay to travel. It was the Sunday before we left, when my brothers and I were in the field, a kilometer from the ranch, shooing away the flies, with our naked torsos darkened by the hot sun of that month, playing with three dogs that had followed us in our last move. Dad appeared from the road of the little town, which consisted of nothing more than a warehouse, and he threw us some bones. It was common for us to play with anything, and the game of taba, although already out of use by our time, could still be found in those places.

"They gave them to me in the warehouse," he said, while the dogs pounced on the bones.

"Do you know how to play, dad?" I asked.

-No, I don't remember anymore.

Perhaps he thought, as I did many years later when remembering that day, about the bone that his mother used to tell the future.

Raúl, who was almost sixteen years old, looked at the bones that the dogs were trying to chew.

-But, old man, isn't taba played with vertebrae?

-Almost always, but any It was served.

I stole the bones from the dogs and began to observe them. They were long bones cut across. They were tibia bones.

So the four of us, without thinking about it, sat on the ground, in a circle, leaving the dogs outside. We threw the bones into the center and started playing. Nobody knew, but somehow we invented a game that the four of us could easily understand. My old man watched us fascinated, but already invaded by that sadness of failure that would make us leave in a few days. I guessed the fire in his eyes, and the flies, flying over the abandoned fields, confirmed it. We were four men playing like children, manipulating the residual product of someone else's death in our hands.

-They told me they are the bones of an old woman.

We look at him without understanding.

-That's why I brought them. They are the bones of an old woman who died alone on her ranch about five years ago. She was over ninety, and since she had no family they found her several months later.

We continue playing. It was the last time that Dad and Raúl looked at each other with appreciation, touching each other's bodies in rough games, patting each other's chests and faces without smiles. Maybe, just maybe,

because I felt it too, the dust, although dry, of those bones, were able to bring us together, father and children. Bone lime has an affinity for the dryness of summer's burning skin. The viscera dry out and rot, and the nails and hair continue to grow for a time after death. But the bones persist. They are eternal like gods, probably more so than them. The bones carry traces, they are timeless because they are the same in the past and in the future. Did dad know? I do not think so. Chance is another mask for causality. Memory is a symbiosis of desires and rejections. What Dad needed to remember, as we all need to remember pain sometimes, was identification with his children, and with his first child in particular.

Then we went to the ranch, where mom and Clarisa were waiting for us. Dad and Raúl returned in silence, side by side, perhaps thinking about the bones that were left in the field, abandoned even by the mangy dogs that accompanied us.

14

At night the three of us went to the town brothel. We left the truck next to the little house, with a gable roof, broken plaster and a metal door stolen from somewhere and that had nothing to do with the origin of the house. It was two stories high, and had once belonged to a middle-class family. But the brothel had been operating there for fifteen years, according to what they said. A couple of times, coinciding with elections, he had suffered raids and the whores and clients were arrested. On one of those occasions they knocked down the original door and had to replace it; perhaps it was the manager who made the arrangements for the women who stole the door from some abandoned factory. But they usually reopened two days later, when the temporary fury of honesty and decorum was forgotten or consumed by another satisfaction no less instinctive and intense than that of political success.

The customers were locals, and only a few occasional travelers passed by. Some truck driver, some drunk passing through. For this reason, the clients were almost permanent, and each one had his favorite woman. Now that I think about it, it was almost like having a wife, because everyone slept with the same one for months and years, if the woman lasted that long in the place. Of course, the girls changed, some were thrown out by the matron, sometimes new ones came in, and these were tested by each of the regular clients. The matron knew that the novelty gave quick money but that it was also ephemeral. The new one, then, became part of the fixed and permanent staff, leaving her place to another who would come not long

after. In fifteen years, many must have passed, who knows what the first ones would look like now. That's what I thought about sometimes, in bed with the whore I had chosen when I went there for the first time. I tried others, but none satisfied me like this one.

Her name was Nicolasa. Curious name, I told myself the first time. It sounded strange to me, old for the age she represented.

"What are the old whores like?" I asked, looking at the unpainted and dark ceiling, where the opaque light from the nightstand couldn't reach. He was naked and covered by the sheet that smelled of semen and humidity. She was kneeling on the bed, naked and combing her hair after making love.

-Look at Doña Úrsula and you will realize it.

Úrsula was the matron. Nicolasa put down the comb and grabbed a towel. She put it in a basin with water that must not have been very clean and wiped the wet towel over her sex. He probably cleaned the crust of dried semen on his thighs, mine or another guy's. Because I must explain that while each of the regular customers had her favorite, sometimes several had the same one. to favorite. And that didn't bother me, it was an extra sensation that encouraged sex. Possessing what another had possessed, penetrating what another had penetrated, feeling that another before and after would enjoy the same thing brought men together in a way that was beyond all logic. In the moments where man forgets everything, absolutely, except the moment in which his body is a body, when pain is just another pleasure, the mind and soul leave, they are suspended in a limbo hidden in the darkness of those ceilings. of old brothels, watching how the body sinks and moves in the gaseous waters of a bed full of ghosts, of men and women who left their remains, because secretions are dead things, fragments that seem to have gone ahead on our path towards death.

Raúl and Pedro must have been in other rooms. Pedro was the only one who had a girlfriend. Her name was Dominga, he had met her in Coronda. She was with his family, while he hoped to raise money to get married and settle down. He would spend a lot of time, it's true, but he seemed really in love. Sometimes weeks went by without speaking, because Pedro hardly knew how to write, so he had to go to a town with a telephone to call her. That didn't mean, however, that he needed to take it out on a whore from time to time. And the ones that my brothers had chosen were...I don't know how to describe them...now I realize that I almost don't remember them.

Doña Úrsula insisted on hygiene, but it was rare for the men to pay attention to her. Many drunks came, but with her handful of bills, and she had to comply. During those fifteen years, there were illnesses, they told me, there were girls who left because they could no longer work. There was a scandal three years earlier. A truck driver arrived on a Saturday night, went into a room with one of the girls, and ten minutes later a scream was

heard. It was a man's cry. They saw him come out naked scratching his crotch.

-The bitch is rotting! -He said while the other men waiting in the room saw him leave.

But the matron did not laugh. She entered the room and dragged the whore out. She hid it in a back bathroom and they spent half an hour inside. They say she washed her from top to bottom, but her smell could be smelled coming from the bathroom and the room where they had taken her from. She was dying, surely.

I left the room and entered the living room. Raúl was drinking wine from a bottle, with one of the girls sitting on his lap. Other men danced without music with several girls. Doña Úrsula watched from behind the counter that was near the entrance door. A dim light illuminated her old, dry face. Her hand went back and forth from the little drawer where she kept the money. It was petty cash, she said.

-Where does he keep her millions? -I asked him one day, when he was already one of the regular customers. She looked at me suspiciously, as if she was taking me seriously.

"That doesn't matter to you," she told me.

The girls smiled at me, they were smarter than the old woman, maybe. But one makes a mistake at the age I was then. Things are more complicated than fucking inside a woman with no other smell than the acrid breath of her yellow teeth.

It was twelve at night, still early. I didn't know what we were going to do tomorrow. The sunflower field was waiting, and we didn't know or didn't want to know what was coming.

"Time to mourn," Raúl said, as if he had read my thoughts in the expression on my face. After working so much for the old man, a few days of rest doesn't hurt us.

I know it was irony, but I couldn't contrast it with a logic that in that place and at that time seemed as ridiculous as giving a sermon in the style of Father Maccabeus.

Between the cloud of cigarette smoke and the gloom that the ceiling lamp did no effort to dispel, I saw Dr. Dergan, the veterinarian. He tried to follow an imaginary rhythm, guiding one of the girls, who let herself go, almost dragging her feet, abandoned to the tall, thin body of the doctor. He was a peculiar man, little was known about him. He had arrived one night, they told us, after walking two days from the station of the nearest town, with a dog following in his footsteps and a fine leather suitcase. He was wearing a gringo hat, a scarf around his neck and a long, thin cigarette. The

aroma of cigarettes, now as then, was so intense and pleasant that no one complained about seeing him smoke all day, even when he was tending to the animals. Wherever he passed, there were cigarette butts and burnt matches. They were European cigarettes, because he was born in France, but he never talked about that. Why he emigrated, no one knew, and although Father Macabeo tried to find out, he found a silence more closed than the strange French language that the priest completely did not know. The doctor was angry with him for wanting to mess with him, for talking behind his back. One day he confronted her or at the door of the church and said:

-No priest is on my heels...

They say that Father Macabeo at first did not understand what he was talking about. The French accent and that unsubtle hint seemed to have confused him. He also didn't have time to react, the doctor turned his back on him after blowing a puff of smoke in his face, which this time, they said, smelled rancid, as if the anger was translated in that way that was more expressive than words.

-The priest will know a lot about Latin, yes he knows..., but about discretion, he knows nothing.

He walked down the street saying this, while the old women who were leaving mass looked at him in amazement. They murmured obvious disapproval and approached Father Maccabeus. He smiled immediately, recovering from his surprise. Maybe it was true that he had not understood anything, but little by little he would understand throughout that Sunday. Then he left Dr. Dergan alone.

The vet was drunk tonight. He almost fell back against the table. The girl put her arms around his waist and told him to lean on her. She was half his height, but his strength was certainly no match for her. She helped him sit on the couch where I had sat watching them.

-Hello, Nicanor.

-Hello, doctor.

Dergan put his arm around my shoulders and offered me a glass of gin that the girl had just brought him. I thanked him, but declined. Despite the cigarette between his lips, he understood her perfectly.

-Which one did you fuck today? -He asked, looking around at the girls sitting and those coming and going from the rooms.

-The usual one, Nicolasa.

Dergan smiled at me and elbowed me hard in the ribs.

-Good mouth and good ass, you are more alive than you seem, you. All the Espinozas keep things to themselves. Meek...but inside, old man...

I must have put on a serious face, because he looked at me intently and suddenly burst out laughing.

-It's a joke! -and he slapped me on the face forcefully but with a affection that I would rarely feel in my life.

"What they did to young Dr. Ruiz was good." He took a drink and left the glass on the floor. Now he must be fighting with the old man, and the day after tomorrow he is going to Buenos Aires.

I don't know if he expected anything from me. It wasn't the type of digging into other people's lives. Maybe I was curious about what he must be saying about us in town, but his interest never reached that much. His life seemed to have limits, walls of boards between which he saw and let only some things be seen, enough to leave the imagination free, I think. Mystery is always more interesting than the truth. Doña Eva and the old gossips couldn't understand that, nor could Father Macabeo with all his boasting of pious sentimentality. Both they and the priest spat out their own miseries to soften the land they were trying to explore. But Dr. Dergan acted as a good scientist should, like a paleontologist who with clean gloves and fine brushes searches through the past without breaking the fragile dead threads with which each of us tries to cover his secrets.

A while later he approached me and I felt his breath on the right side of my face. For a moment I wondered if he would propose what we had seen him and the young Dr. Ruiz do.

-You're already grown up, Nicanor. I'm going to show you something that will interest you.

I looked around for my brothers. Raúl was asleep in a chair, snoring. Pedro must have left without me seeing him, sometimes he would take one of the girls to the field, or he would go with a bottle to walk alone all night.

-Don't worry about them. They're going to sleep it off. Come...

We got up. He stopped in front of Doña Úrsula's counter, threw her some bills. When I went to pay mine, he said:

-I invite you, kid...

We left the warm interior of the brothel and took to the street. The church was dark, except for the sacristy window. I didn't know what was leading me there, but it was the first thing I saw when I came out.

-We are going to hear night mass, the priest likes it much more than the ones he gives to the old women during the day.

He put a finger on his lips indicating silence. He looked around like a thief, not even the dogs were awake at that hour of the morning. We approached the church and turned towards the back door. Father Macabeo entered there when the church was closed. There was a window with flimsy shutters. Lines of dirty yellow light fell on the floor under the window. Dr. Dergan moved his index finger calling me to look. We peek through the crack between the broken boards of the shutter. There were no curtains, so I clearly saw Father Maccabeus' bed, illuminated by a lamp next to the nightstand.

The priest was not alone. First I had to get used to recognizing in the naked body with loose flesh the man I had always seen in black and a cassock. He maintained a slim body He was overweight, his white skin covered by thick, reddish hair, graying on his chest. I didn't hear what he was saying, because he turned face down, caressing with his entire body another body that was lying on the bed, under him, and whose legs I could barely see. It was when he moved and lay on his back that I saw a very young woman, with dark skin and long, straight hair. She wasn't any of the whores, that's what she was sure of.

Dergan looked at me and motioned for us to move away a little to talk.

-The priest doesn't visit the whorehouse, Nicanor. He gets them in town.

I had to continue with the surprised face that the doctor had seen on me before.

-What are you amazed at? Did you think that priests get rid of it with their hands alone? He-he laughed, but immediately covered his mouth. His shoulders moved as if he couldn't contain his laughter.

-Do you want to continue looking? -he asked me.

I shook my head.

-So, let's go.

Although he was drunk, the alcohol must be dissipating in his blood. When we separated, I watched him enter his office. There were always a couple of dogs waiting for him at the door to feed them. They stood up and wagged their tails when they saw him. He went in, came back out with a couple of meaty bones, and threw them at her. The animals ran and lay down to bite their piece with enthusiasm. The door closed and I knew that Dr. Dergan would sleep the rest of the night alone, and in the morning he would be awakened only by the soft barking of grateful dogs.

As he walked away, I told myself that some men will always be alone, they have enough strength to seek solitude as others despair of losing it.

fifteen

On the way home, I watched the moon over the path. It must have been after three in the morning. My head didn't hurt like other times after leaving the brothel, my eyes didn't burn or I felt dirty like other times. I'm not talking about morally dirty, but about that dirt of ashes, hands that have touched sweaty bodies, the feeling that one takes with them as something more than memories, because the smell of human secretions is as concrete and as eternal as a photograph. He had hardly eaten and was not hungry. I was just thinking about what I had seen a while ago, and I realized that I already knew it, even if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. I had heard it said to my brothers, to the men of the town, my own imagination had pronounced it long before that a man cannot endure life without another person sleeping next to him in bed. Sometimes one night, sometimes two, but the third is impossible to bear.

And was that wrong? I asked myself. Even though it was the town priest, was he wrong?

It depends on who it is, Raúl would have answered me. The girl he had seen that night in Father Maccabeus's bed, was she already a woman? In the shadows I could barely see her face. She looked older, but maybe she was a teenager. We all like young women, we have to admit it. And what better than a man of God to sin and forgive at the same time. The great pleasure of penetrating a woman's body implies pain and a counterclaim, a kidnapping and a reward. Taking that person's life just by taking them to another place for a moment, and then returning to that same bed, which slowly and surreptitiously becomes filled with guilt and a certain boredom that must be confessed if we do not desire madness. Confession and punishment, then atonement with a couple of morning prayers in front of the church altar.

When I was no more than a hundred meters from home, I saw a halo of white light peeking out from behind the field of sunflowers. It was the incipient dawn. Then I remembered the day I found Dad in the field, after getting out of prison. I was so young that I loved my father despite everything he had put us through, so I followed him everywhere. It was night when I followed him to the field. The crops had gone bad, mom was preparing things for the next day's departure. She had been weak for a while, I know she was in bed for two months after Dad was arrested. She then recovered, but she was thin and pale, with no shine in her eyes.

My old man walked with his hands behind his back, not knowing that I was following him not too far behind. The night dew was cool, the crickets

chirped frantically. He crossed the fields of dead crops, looking at the ground. He almost looked like a general walking around the field after the battle. I knew, as an irrefutable certainty, that those crops, whatever they were, were children for him. He did not love them as he could love children of flesh and blood, but as fragments that one creates with his own hands, with the effort of the body and the intelligence of the mind. A child does not need to be generated except with semen and a clear effort that lasts no more than a moment. Then will come the task of raising it, but raising is not exactly creating. Yeah Something that relates us to God is only the capacity for creation. God, like us, does not always choose to later raise those he has begotten. Father Maccabeus knows this, I suppose because he is so close to the house of God, at least to the offices that he, as a religious man, administers. If a part of your body makes you hurt, cut it off. The Old Testament says something like that. A man should not leave useless fragments, he should not procreate disjointed, deformed or incapacitated parts. He must leave no clues of his failure in the world. That's why the fire, the blessing of fire for my father's soul. Each game was not an end, but a beginning, a genesis that he believed he had the privilege of beginning again. That night I would make a fire, I knew it, and I wanted to see how it started. I had been told about it, but never seen it.

Dad walked for more than an hour. He was saying something under his breath, but I didn't understand him. He seemed to brood, sometimes talking to someone else, perhaps to God. He made me think of Christ after the last supper, in the olive grove, waiting for Judas's kiss. But sometimes the wind has the quality of pretending to caress us, even kiss us when it blows as softly as a man's whistle in the night, depositing its click, the trill and the percussive sonority of two lips, leaving the necessary space for the passage to pass. infinite kiss

We reached what was supposed to be the limit of our field. There was an old tractor, which must have belonged to the neighbor. We had never had a tractor, although my old man would have liked it. In some way it would have been like succeeding, settling permanently in a land. Wasn't that also dying? I asked myself, as he remembered that old night ten years before.

He got on the tractor. I heard him start the engine. He drove the machine over the dead crops and drove over them again and again. A column of smoke came out of the exhaust towards the stars and the moon that illuminated the strange landscape of that man who seemed to be working on his nightly dream. Dreaming is that too, it seems to me, sowing and reaping, but almost always reaping what we have sown during the day. What he did every night in his dream, he was doing now. He didn't seem to want to wait for other forces, those emanating from the dream, to do the job this time. He seemed nervous now, and he was cursing without me being able to understand him with the engine of the machine. I thought I heard almost a scream of rage, or maybe I was confused by fatigue and the situation, maybe they were just howls from nearby dogs.

Then my old man stopped the tractor, got out, took something out of his pocket and suddenly I saw a light, a small flame. But in it I discovered the future of that flame, the great and encompassing fire. He threw the match into the tractor's fuel tank, and fled. The roar and the figure of him running and almost flying across the field were one and the same fragment of time. A space lost by the almost eternal triumph of time. The fire spread across the dry field, the fire ran, it dispersed among the plants as old as centuries, powerful as food for the most ancient of the elements of creation.

I cried. I screamed for my father. I thought he had died, but he appeared at my side a few minutes later, all black with soot, covered in burns on his hands and back, his face black and red, swollen. He looked tremendously like those sacred images of the indigenous Christs, or even the dirty and old Christ from Father Macabeo's church. He touched my head and fainted. The next day the doctor came and had to stay two days in a row taking care of him. Mom covered Dad's sores with cold cloths soaked in fresh sap.

She was given injections. In ten days he was already on his feet.

16

None of the three of us hardly slept. Then I would know that Mom didn't either. When I arrived in the early morning she was awake, sitting in a chair, one elbow resting on the table. In the other chair was Mrs. Valverde.

-What's happening? -I asked, because it seemed strange to me that Mom had waited up for us, and especially that her neighbor had paid a visit so early.

-Your mother felt bad last night. Since none of you were there to take care of her, she walked to my house. She wouldn't have arrived if she hadn't met my little farmhand on the way. I told her to go with me, but she insisted on coming here. I was afraid that you would be scared if you didn't see her. What do they care about you, I told him, they left as whores and are going to come back drunk, what sons! she-she finished her sentence, joining her hands and looking at the sky.

Mom told me not to pay attention to him. It was already good.

-You go get some sleep, Nicanor. You look more haggard than a raccoon.

I listened to him. They started talking while preparing mate. I heard them like the night before, but now it was already dawn, and although I didn't manage to fall asleep completely, I'm not sure if I really heard them or if it was a dream. For a moment I thought I know that Mrs. Valverde was

running her chair to get up and leave. But a little while later I heard her voice shouting at her, asking mom things that I didn't understand. And my old woman answered about a time in the past that I didn't remember, but that must have been, from what she said, only a few years before.

-It's been about ten years since I felt this bad...

-With what she happened to her these days, and the bitterness that children cause... it's no wonder.

-I felt like I was dying, I swear, lady. I only felt like this once...

-And what did she have then?

Mom didn't answer for a while that seemed too long.

-You know, I was in a state, Doña Valverde. I had to do a little job, myself.

-But since she didn't ask for help, that's what we are for! At that time you didn't live here, you know, but there are many like us in the towns.

-It's okay, lady, but where we were at that time there was no one nearby. I couldn't ask for help, my Pedro was in jail, and you will understand...

This time it was Mrs. Valverde who took a while to answer. I heard her sip the mate bulb for a long time. She must have made a gesture that my mother understood, because she didn't need to say anything. They continued talking for a long time. But I kept thinking about when my mother had felt so bad that she was about to die. She could only remember the time she was in bed after Dad's arrest. It was when the priest Macabeo began to come more frequently. He started cooking, taking care of the few animals we had, and especially Clarisa, who was so little at the time. It was at that same time, although her mother was already better, when she decided to catechize us, and she gave us that sermon under the eucalyptus. Father Macabeo and my mother, spending so much time together during those months in my father's absence.

My God, I murmured, in my sleep. And in my dreams I thought I saw Mrs. Valverde turn around on the threshold when she heard me, and make a blatant gesture of contempt, without forgetting to sanctify herself.

It was almost noon when I woke up, and thanks to my mother's shaking.

"Wake up, Nicanor..." she told me.

I opened my eyes. Sitting at the table I found the authority of The Dogs in full: the commissioner, the old doctor Ruiz and Father Macabeo. I got up

startled. He was in long underwear and a t-shirt. I put on my pants and washed my face in the basin Mom had filled.

"Good afternoon," said Father Macabeo, with a smile.

"Hello..." I said, greeting in general.

-Do you know where your brothers are?

-I guess in the field. Raúl said that today he would take a look at the sunflowers.

Ruiz and the commissioner looked at each other with complicity.

-Do not protect them, Nicanor. Does not suit you. If you were forced to participate, no one will blame you. "Besides, your old lady needs a man in the house," said the doctor, this time more conciliatory, but he didn't trust me, especially because he didn't understand what they were up to.

"Nicanor," Mom said. This morning Gustavo Valverde came. He came running to tell the boys that the commissioner was coming here. They left for the field while you were sleeping. They escaped. I didn't want them to wake you up, they insisted, but I refused.

"The point, Nicanor," said the commissioner, "is that he brought Doña Clotilde an order from the district judge to exhume your old man's body."

-They're going to do an autopsy, dear.

Then I understood everything. The young Ruiz was going to La Plata, so the old doctor was no longer concerned about the reputation of his son. He had decided to make our lives impossible, legally, that is. And the law is the justice of the tares.

-Are we arrested, then? -I asked for.

"No," the commissioner answered. Until we get the autopsy results. But Dr. Ruiz filed an accusation through the health department.

"Bodies of doubtful death should not be buried without prior studies," Dr. Ruiz interrupted.

Then the commissioner continued saying:

-So we are obliged to monitor the entire family. They have to stay home until further notice. Now that your brothers escaped, I have to book them as fugitives and suspects.

Mom was still, sitting on the straw chair a couple of meters from all of us. I was still standing in the middle of the room, confused by the midday light that fell intensely dazzling on the faces of the three men. I looked at

the door, there was a police officer standing with his back to the house. Father Maccabeus stood up and took me by the shoulders.

-You are an intelligent boy, you are the only one who went to school. Your mother and we trust that you have some brains and use it well.

The priest put a finger of his right hand on my forehead and gently tapped me in remonstrance. I remembered how I had seen him last night, and I would have liked to mention it in front of the commissioner and the doctor. But it was useless, I told myself, men are men, and Under the stone faces we all have poisonous offspring.

-Don't you know where they could have hidden?

I shook my head and pulled away abruptly. I fell on the bed and my mother went to console me, believing that she was crying. And while her face was against the sheets, I remembered the shotgun under the bed. That's when I decided to do it. It was the only chance. I pushed mom and threw her to the floor. The priest and the doctor went to help her get up. A trickle of blood ran from her forehead from hitting the edge of the bed. The commissioner also came over to help, and luckily he didn't try to grab me. That was my advantage, everyone still believed I was a boy, and a scared boy, confused by the death of my father and the unhealthy influence of my brothers. Mom seemed sicker than the blow justified. Was she faking it, perhaps? Would she know what I was planning? Did she also remember the shotgun that Dad had given me and that I hid under the bed? I don't know, nor was I ever able to ask her in the few years she lived after this.

The commissioner turned his back to me for a minute, helping my old woman stand up, then I took out the gun and hit the commissioner with the butt. The others couldn't react because they were holding mom. I ran to the door just as the guard walked in, pointed it at him and he stopped. I put the cannon on his chest and he looked at me scared, he was a boy who couldn't have been more than a year older than me. Then I ran away with all my strength.

I continued running on the dry land around the house, entered the sunflower field and ran through it completely. I arrived at the fields of the neighboring farm and fled through the pumpkin, potato and vegetable crops. The scarecrows watched me pass by with contemplative and serene eyes, eyes of absolute peace. I had envied them when I was a boy, they lived in the countryside and the birds settled on them, like they did with Saint Francis of Assisi. The priest had told us about the saint in the catechism classes that he gave us at that time, and for a few days I also dreamed, credulously, of becoming a priest, of becoming the saint of the poor. He was a boy then, and a boy's mind is known to embrace all possibilities as absolute certainties.

I ran for more than an hour straight, and I had to stop. He had crossed two bridges and crossed two streams. It must have been several kilometers

from the town. I recognized the place, we sometimes went fishing there on Sundays. It was not a place of crops but of weeds and trees. It was a kind of forest with some wild animals, weasels, a lot of snakes. They were the land adjacent to Valverde's farm. I don't know why my steps took me there, it was the first thing that occurred to me when I fled, to go through the less traveled places, places where the commissioner would not search at first because they were outside his jurisdiction. I had little time to find my brothers, so I had to use it wisely. I thought of Valverde arriving home, agitated, notifying my brothers of the arrival of the commissioner after seeing the truck crossing the bridge two kilometers from home. I knew that Gustavo Valverde used to spend a lot of time around these parts. They said that he used animals, that he killed them or crossed them with others to experiment. None of this was true, probably. He was a good boy, something rare, it's true, in his chosen solitude, but I couldn't imagine him doing those things.

There was an abandoned ranch nearby. My brothers and I had passed by a couple of times to protect ourselves from some sudden rain. Its adobe walls were very weak and the straw and wood roof was open in several places. Once we had found Valverde inside, repairing it. I was going to use it as a laboratory, he said. We laughed at him, and he got angry. He wanted us to leave and we told him to go to hell. “The kid is crazy,” Raúl commented as we walked away. But crazy or not, he had been the one who had warned us about the commissioner now, and perhaps he had also told Raúl and Pedro to hide in the little ranch.

I didn't remember exactly the exact place, so I made my way through the tall plants. I would have needed a machete instead of the shotgun, but at least this one helped me hit a couple of snakes I encountered along the way. The birds and the sound of water in the stream could no longer be heard. I heard a dog barking, and I wondered if the gendarmes were looking for us. At the end of two hours I found myself in front of the gate of the ranch. It was mid-afternoon, and the silence from inside was complete.

"Raúl, Pedro!" I said without raising my voice too much. I approached the door, then pressed my ear to the wood, and suddenly the door opened and I fell to the floor. It was dark inside and a hand grabbed my arm without giving me time to get up. I heard some whispers and recognized Pedro's voice. They closed the door and turned on a lamp. Petroleum.

The place smelled like dirty animals, but it was empty. Some old, dried turds had filled the place with a stable smell. I saw my brothers' faces, watching me anxiously.

-What happened? -Raúl asked.

-How did you escape? -Peter said.

I explained to them what had happened. They looked at me with confidence, and I felt that I had gained worth as a man before them. They

began to hit me without abruptness, like when we were kids and we fought in the fields, rolling in the dirt and hay, in the horse manure without realizing it. We ended up completely dirty and couldn't stand ourselves, so we would throw ourselves naked into the stream. Then we would wash the clothes a little so that the old woman wouldn't get angry, and we would return home in our underwear, drying ourselves in the sun on the road and with the wet clothes on our backs.

Although we were grown up now, and it was understandable that we felt a little embarrassed, the same awareness that we were behaving as in our common memory justified and exalted the game. We laughed as we fought. We were almost the same height and shape, but Raúl was a little more athletic and heavier, Pedro was agile like a boxer, and I was too skinny. In that fight, neither tried to really harm the other, we fell to the floor, one tried to escape, the other grabbed him by the heel while the third in turn held him against the floor. What was the point of maintaining so much silence before if now anyone who approached the ranch could hear us. But somehow we couldn't stop, as if we knew that the three of us would never be together again.

Suddenly, Raúl remained still, sitting on the ground. Pedro and I looked at him, still agitated and with our muscles tense from the struggle. My older brother put a finger on his lips, and we tried to listen too.

"I think I heard something," he said very quietly, and soon we heard a knock on the door. The three of us got up, turned off the lamp and I handed the shotgun to Raúl. He stood right in front of the door, Pedro was holding her back because they were trying to push her.

-Espinoza?

It was a familiar and young voice, I didn't recognize it at first, but Pedro opened the door and Raúl lowered his gun. Valverde entered and hugged Pedro.

-Good shelter, isn't it?

-Thank you, old man, you saved us for now.

-Hello, Nicanor.

I went up to greet him and thanked him for what he had done for us.

"They don't owe me anything," he said. He was not a guy who had very regular contact with others, and many made fun of him. But since we had never interfered with his business, nor had he cared about what was said about the animals he raised, perhaps he appreciated us precisely for that. In the absence of love, it is common to confuse indifference with a certain kind of affection, and sometimes that is all we can settle for.

-Do you know something? -Raúl asked.

-Nothing, but they sent to look for me at my house, since they know that I warned them...

-And they didn't follow you? –Pedro approached to look through the cracks in the boarded window.

-Guys, I've lived here since I was born, I know the animals and every tree. I know how to get there and how to make them lose my trail. But I still don't think I'll come back, because that's why I brought you this.

We had not seen the bag he was carrying behind his back. He put it on the floor and opened it. There was meat and drinks, bread and some fruits.

-It's enough for a day and a half, if they take care of it, but they will have to leave here by tomorrow night at the most. Sooner or later they will find the place.

-You're right...-said Raúl.

-And what do they have planned?

We looked at him and couldn't help but laugh.

-Nothing. Eat and get drunk to forget what we got ourselves into, if you brought some wine.

Valverde bent down and took out two bottles of the only wine available in the Los Perros warehouse. Pedro grabbed one and uncorked it with his teeth. He took a long drink and passed it to Raúl. He did the same and passed it to me. I drank carefully and thirstily. He had run almost three hours straight and I deserved it. I offered the bottle to Valverde and he took a sip. His eyes were shining, and I felt sorry for him. We were perhaps the only friends he had in his entire life, the only real ones he would have, surely, even if that friendship lasted a few minutes in a dark ranch, locked up and chased by the police. It is likely that friendship is nothing more than that, a few moments of common agreement, of absolute complacency and dedication, without resentments, prejudices or fears. Even fear is a benefactor for friendship, the fear that threatens from outside is a collective monster that makes us unite momentarily. It provokes encounters that shine like sparks in the night, first yellow, then reddish like the color of wine held up to the light, that wine that, like a communion, passed from hand to hand and from mouth to mouth. Until the four of you We saw the same breath, and the four of us were priests of the same sect destined to disappear.

Nobody told us when dad got out of prison. He arrived one day when it was getting dark, walking from the town. He had been hitchhiking until a truck driver agreed to take him to Coronda. Then he had to walk to our ranch. He looked much skinnier, with straight, gray and dirty hair, contracted cheeks and a thick beard. He was wearing the same clothes he had left in, but obviously he didn't wear them in all those months. As luggage he carried on his shoulders a leather bag that had been given to him in prison for food and a pair of used boots to change into on the way.

I was playing with the dog we had left. Now she had grown puppies, the children of the male who had been killed by the policeman's gun. My brothers and I tried to place them among the neighbors, except Clarisa who had wanted to stay with everyone. We had three left to share, and the four dogs, Clarisa and I saw him arrive from the dawning shadow of dusk. At first we didn't imagine who it could be, we had already resigned ourselves to my old man's absence. The dog got up while he was still a little far away and ran wagging her tail. Then I sensed who it was, and my heart beat so hard that it hurt. Only when he was so close that it was impossible not to see his face, I dared to tell myself that it was true, not a dream. Clarisa hesitated a little, not that she had forgotten, but her mind lived more in the present than in the past. When the memory of her became flesh in her memory, she could not avoid her usual crying, which she used almost constantly for everything, whether joys or tragedies. She cried and the dogs began to circle around her and lick her face. Dad approached her and picked her up. The dogs sniffed his boots and pants, little by little the puppies accepted him.

-Dad! -I shouted, and went up to hug him. He pressed my face against his skinny belly, and I heard the sound of his stomach asking for food.

Then Mom came out, with the dishcloth in her hand and drying her wet hands after washing the dishes. She waited a moment, I think she was waiting for Dad to get closer to the light inside to see him properly before hugging him. Not because I doubted that it was him, but because I doubted what he would look like. Six months is a long time, almost the limit at which many of us begin to get used to the idea that the dead will never return. And I think that's what he was becoming for her, a dead man. Dad approached him with my sister, and I grabbed his hand. Mom then put her arms around her neck and she stayed like that, clinging to her husband's body for several minutes.

Raúl and Pedro came out and stood at the door, looking at us.

-How are you guys? -said dad.

They did not say anything. Pedro smiled and went up to give her a kiss. Raúl simply greeted:

-Hello, old man.

I think Dad felt hurt, because I saw him tear up a little when Raúl turned his back on him and went back inside.

That night we had already eaten, but Mom prepared him something that was left over from dinner.

-It seems like they don't lack food…I'm glad they weren't hungry.

-Sometimes Father Macabeo comes to eat, that's why I do more, but today he had to go to give the last rites at the Gómez ranch.

-The priest came to visit me, but I did not receive him.

-You did wrong, he helped us a lot while you were away.

"I imagine," he said, and I don't know how much irony or disbelief there was in his tone.

Pedro and Raúl looked at each other and lowered their heads.

I dedicated myself to watching him eat in silence, trying to find in his gestures and manner, even in his silence, the man we had lost in that same room six months before. I thought I saw him again with the spoon in his hand, sipping noisily and laughing at my mother's protests, just before the door opened with force and the boots of the police burst in to destroy the precarious and subtle peace we had achieved. like a break, a summer parenthesis within the long winter of our family failure.

Then mom sent us to sleep, and they were left alone, talking, I guess, but I couldn't hear anything they said.

In the morning, Dad gathered the three of us together and wanted to know what had happened to the fields.

-Nothing, old man. Everything is in ruins. "We live off the charity that Father Macabeo gives us," said Raúl.

-And why the hell didn't it occur to them to plant something? If you know, damn, Pedrito could help you.

-But, old man, we didn't have money for the seeds, and they didn't want to give us credit. They took the horses and the plow because of debts in the warehouse and forage.

Dad scratched his beard, thinking.

-And that priest didn't offer himself as a guarantee? Since he helped them so much.

We didn't know what to answer. To the Once, in all those months, I heard Mom suggest the same thing to Father Macabeo, but I don't know what happened next. It was before she became ill, and she never spoke of it again when she recovered. Father Macabeo began to come less often, he stopped giving us catechism and every time we saw him he had a bad mood and avoided being alone with mom. They said that he had problems in the town, that they wanted to get him out of the parish, and that translated into his continuous bad mood and in the sermons that every Sunday were harder, more severe, even cruel. He lost many parishioners at that time, including several of the eternal old faithful who followed him sun and shade, both at mass and in his charitable tasks.

-Well, let's see how the land is.

He went ahead and we followed him in single file, from oldest to youngest. Now that I think about it, that arrangement must have meant something, because usually the four of us were in the same front line, one next to the other. But this time dad had taken the lead and we adjusted to this ruling with which he seemed to regain his lost authority. Or perhaps it was to hide from him, so as not to see what we would soon see? Because as we entered the countryside, abandoned and without irrigation, we discovered the mounds of stones that a truck had brought three months ago from a construction site in Coronda. Beyond were piles of trash and cans that neighbors had thrown away for almost half a year. We continued walking and found skeletons of burned cars, and the remains of some stolen ones.

It was a desolate landscape, but recognized by my brothers and me. We had played among those remains, completely unconcerned by the furrows of the land that our father had plowed shortly before he was arrested. At every moment he stopped to contemplate as if he were not seeing ordinary devastation, but a lunar landscape. He didn't say anything to us, he just stood with his hands on his waist, his eyebrows furrowed, and his heart trembling. And I know that his heart was shaking because his lips were moving with that characteristic gesture that we have always known about him. A rubbing of lips, a continuous and feverish biting.

We stood next to him, even though we had our heads bowed, undoubtedly embarrassed by the carelessness he was going to attribute to us. We looked at him out of the corner of our eyes, sensing the arrival of his anger like an erupting volcano that was emerging from that dead landscape. Not a field on the Entre Ríos plain, but a vast space of shifting tectonic plates, letting the ungovernable pressure of lava flow upward.

When we reached the last section, Dad bent down and started digging in the dirt. I don't know what his goal was, maybe just to do something with his hands while he gave himself time to think. Then, from a burrow, several rats came out, which were not far from biting his hand. He was squatting and when he backed away he fell on his tail. He sat there watching the rats walk

away. He looked at us with a fury that did not produce fear in me but rather immense pity, because his eyes were crying as they declared his anger.

He got up and grabbed Raúl by the clothes, then Pedro, and then me, but he immediately let go of us and started shaking someone else, while he said:

-But damn shit! How did they not do something! Why didn't they take care of him! The land is for

feed them, you fucking idiots! Bastards! Sons of a thousand whores!

-But, old man! -said Raúl-. What could we do? They started throwing things, we complained, we fought a lot of times, but they didn't pay attention to us because we are kids.

-They didn't do anything because it was convenient for them, you lazy shits! They had that priest who brought them food and they made do until his idiotic father came back to continue working himself to death!

-But, old man...! -Peter began to say.

Dad didn't let him finish, he slapped him. Raúl did not remain silent.

-Then why did you fucking leave?! Why did you let the shitty priest come every day and be alone with the old woman?!

Dad looked at him silently without reacting. Raúl was angrier than he had ever seen him. I saw mom approaching, still far away, and I think she heard our screams because she started to approach almost running. But dad hadn't seen her. He grabbed Raúl by one arm and began hitting him in the face with clean, forceful punches. Pedro hung on his other arm to separate him, and he also received his share. Raúl was left on the floor, awake but lost in the pain and swelling that was forming in his face. Then mom came and said:

-What are you doing!

But she had already let go and now she was looking at my mother as if she were looking at someone else. As if saying: You?, in the same way and tone as you? that my mother would pronounce a few years later. There are time cycles, without a doubt, there are stories that repeat themselves without impact. ort the times and their protagonists.

When she went to bend down next to Raúl, he grabbed her by the hair and started shaking her from side to side, throwing her to the floor and dragging her, going back and forth over the dirty dirt under whose surface the rats lived. Pedro wanted to avoid it and couldn't, I jumped on the old man's back, but he continued mistreating my mother without bothering about me. Raúl was still on the floor, his face red and bleeding. Pedro ran

away but immediately returned with a piece of iron that he took from the dump. My father didn't see it.

-Let go, Nicanor! -He told me.

Then I let myself fall and he hit dad with the iron near the back of the head. The old man screamed and let go of Mom. She fell to her knees, clutching her head in her hands.

-You killed him! -I told.

Pedro looked at me, and I read the panic in his eyes. Then he threw the iron and ran. Raúl had gotten up and decided to escape. I felt a lump in my throat and it was difficult to breathe. I felt my heart beating in my wrists and head with tremendous force. I followed my brothers, as every younger brother knows how to do.

In the afternoon mom and dad came back. He walked dragging her feet, resting her body on his, whose hair was disheveled and her face dirty with dirt and tears. The old man let himself lie on the pallet and mother brought him a basin. She took off his clothes, started washing him with a sponge with soap and water.

All night Dad was delirious. I couldn't help but cry. Pedro didn't want to go to bed, he sat in a corner with his knees bent and his head between his legs. Raúl was in his bed, with an ice pack on his face. We heard the old man say thousands of things. Memories of prison, perhaps, names of cellmates, perhaps, but he repeated a meaningless phrase, almost like all the rest, but to which even I, with just turned ten years old, attached a shameful and terrible.

"In this bed," he repeated, "in this bed..."

He was lying there for three days. Father Maccabeus did not appear in all that time. He certainly knew that Dad had gotten out of prison. Mom didn't want us to go look for the doctor, even though Pedro offered countless times. He also did not try to console his son.

The third night, I went out to urinate and looked at the field. It was beautiful and sad at the same time. I knew we would have to leave soon. I saw the glow of dawn in the distance, or perhaps it was the lights of the nearest city, which however was very distant. I thought of fire, which is more eternal than water and air. Fire is timeless and can cross empty spaces, cracks, intervals of non-time, and feel clear and strong in a place where it cannot yet be seen, but where it once was or where it will very soon be. .

18

The sun was setting, but we knew little about this inside Valverde's little ranch. Gustavo had not wanted to leave, suddenly he had become afraid. If they happened to see him, all was lost. There was no choice but to wait until nightfall.

-But they are going to dig it up...-said Pedro.

I barely saw it anymore, the oil lamp was running out and our four faces were less than ghosts, they were lines made with chalk by a Mongolian child on the blackboard of darkness.

-And? -said Raúl

-How…and what? They are going to know everything.

-Not if they can't take it to the city.

-And how the hell are we going to stop them sitting here.

-When it gets completely dark we go out. I'll tell you what we're going to do.

"But guys," Valverde said. We have a shotgun and there are many more of them, in addition to weapons...

-Don't say we have, it's not your business...

-They are in my shelter, right? It's my business now.

-It is appreciated...but as I said, we have fire, that is the lesson we learned from our old man. You can't burn what's under the ground, but you can burn what's above it.

I was beginning to understand what Raúl was planning. I was never sure how those flashes of ideas appeared in my brother's head, they seemed to come unexpectedly, surprising us all, because his usual gesture of reluctance and seriousness made him seem rather withdrawn, distant, absent from everything that was happening around him. around. But over the years I got used to realizing that he ruminated on his ideas and his resentments for days and weeks, for years too. One day, when he needed them, he simply exposed them, as something common and ordinary in the future of the world, and there was no turning back. One could be sure that he would comply with that to the letter.

That's why, the day Dad died, we had gone out like every morning at four. We worked two hours before dawn. We had to clear a large part of the field, fumigate the leaves of the sunflowers that were becoming covered in parasites. Luckily the plants resisted all that and the cold of winter. We all

worked angry. The night before, like allThose nights, we had argued with the old man for refusing to have harvested much earlier. We didn't know what he was looking for, his obstinacy was absurd. We had no doubt that his natural madness was going outside of his usual lanes. We were already grown up, and we wanted to become independent, but Mom and Clarisa felt sorry for us, we didn't want to leave them alone with the old man.

However, every night we went to bed convinced that in the morning we would get up with him, wash our faces with the same water he used, drink the same mate, and leave not long after walking towards the field, precariously protected from the cold because of the wool sacks that Father Maccabeus had gotten us. It was Dad's eyes, I think, or his dying figure, his gradually distressed voice, his slowly calm gestures that told us that in the end the old man would not live much longer, and we, without realizing it, wanted to be next to him. Because this way we continued to be sons and men at the same time. He, whose figure we had envied when he was young, that tenacious obstinacy tinged with enormous pride, although bordering on madness and meaninglessness, was the man we would have wanted to be. Who else could we imitate, whose footsteps we could follow, whose worn boots we could compare stepping in the mud of the furrows where the horses had left their dung while plowing. My old man's hair in the sun, long, dark and graying, the ears that as a child I pressed while we played in his bed on Sunday mornings, the black eyes that looked like burnt chestnuts, his smell after bathing, his soft beard that mom put it on when shaving it. The old man shaved only once a week, on Saturday nights. He didn't like to waste a lot of time on personal care, and getting up just fifteen minutes early to shave made him lazy. So on Saturday nights he would strip naked, strip down to just his long underwear, sit in a chair and let Mom shave him with the razor he used for over twenty years. He didn't even bother to have it sharpened, it was she who did it every fifteen or twenty days on a whetstone as old as two generations of Espinozas.

We started to eat something shortly after the sun rose. The old man spit out blood, which despite the poor light of dawn, looked very red on the ground.

-What's up old man? -I asked for.

He cleared his throat and spat again.

"Nothing," he answered.

My brothers didn't pay attention. They got up to go back to work. I watched them get lost among the tall sunflowers that seemed to be moving, turning those flowery heads toward the rising sun. Dad and I got up and followed them. Around noon we heard more throat clearing and coughing. We worked in different places, so we didn't see each other.

-Did you hear? -I shouted.

"How not to hear," said Pedro.

Then I heard Raúl:

-I'm going to see if he needs help.

His footsteps receded. We keep working. For half an hour nothing happened, it even seemed to me that it was too quiet. I felt that the sun was too strong to be winter, I wiped my forehead and decided to take a break.

-Pedro! Raul!

They did not answer me. I went towards the exit of the field and met them on the way home. I ran after them, who were carrying the old man almost carrying him, Dad's arms on each of their backs and their feet dragging the dust.

-What happened?!

-We found him passed out, I ran home to tell the old woman.

I was going to do it when I remembered that neither she nor Clarisa would be there all day, the festival would soon be and they had gone to the seamstress's house to get the dresses. Raúl knew it, Pedro knew it, it was not possible for them to forget it.

"It won't be there," I told them.

-You are right. Then help us load it.

-Am I going to look for Dr. Ruiz?

-I don't think it's necessary, I'll make him some soup and he'll be fine.

I helped lift him and he seemed too heavy to me. I thought at first that he was lucid but weak, but his eyes seemed dead, he had his head hanging on his chest, completely lacking strength. It was when we left him in bed that I realized that we were depositing the body of the man who had been our father.

-But... -I said-...he's already dead.

Pedro looked at Raúl:

-It seems that he died while we were bringing him...

Raúl nodded with a gesture.

"My God," I said. When the old woman and Clarisa find out...

"Yes," said Raúl, with an expression that at that moment he could not name, but in which he would later find the characteristics of cynicism. May God rest him in his Holy Glory.

Pedro made a mocking face and covered his mouth with one hand.

"This time Father Maccabeus is going to be late," he said.

I looked at them and couldn't understand. The old man's body still smelled of dirt and perspiration. Then Raúl brought up a topic that had nothing to do with whatwhat was happening to us.

-Nicanor, do you remember who we saw the other day at the whorehouse?

I looked like I didn't fucking understand what he was talking about. The old man was dead, for God's sake, and we didn't know what had happened to him. Just a little while before Raúl had said that he was going to see what was happening to him and now they brought him in dead. That was the only thing I remembered accurately.

-What we talked about on the way out, about the young doctor Ruiz and the veterinarian. Do you remember?

I answered yes, trying to concentrate on what he was asking me while looking at the body, as if I wanted to make sure it hadn't moved, that maybe I was wrong and at any moment he was going to get up and ask what he was doing. at that time still in bed.

-Well, then let's go to the Ruiz field.

"But it's too late for a doctor," I said.

Pedro rested a hand on my shoulder, with that strange smile that characterized him, and before which one never knew whether to feel peace or fear.

-We need a death certificate, right?

19

It was already night. Only the cicadas and crickets could be heard thundering in the emptiness outside the ranch. It gave the impression of a place with nothing out there, where blackness was not a concentration of the density of things, but a parable of absence, an eternal echo of what things once were and lost forever.

-Did you kill him? -Valverde asked.

The crickets answered him, and he seemed to get along well with the insects and the night. We wouldn't answer him, and he knew it. But maybe

he needed to ask, to get rid of that slug-like restlessness in his mouth. And maybe, by chance, one of us would respond. But none of them did.

-I'm going out tonight to take a look at the countryside.

-Are you sure they're not going to see you?

-More than certainly, at night the dogs aren't even going to bark at me.

We agreed and he came out. The feeling he had was confirmed when we opened the door. The darkness inside seemed more alive and warmer than the darkness outside. I felt that Valverde fell into a well while he walked away, getting lost in the thicket. We closed and sat on the floor again. We didn't want to turn on any lights, we even refrained from speaking out loud for fear that someone was lurking by the door or the boarded up windows. I listened to my brothers' breathing, Raúl's almost imperceptible, serene, incredibly controlled, Pedro's more vibrant, almost like a soft whistle.

-You plan to do? -I asked Raúl.

-I already told you, tomorrow we go out before dawn and burn the field.

-So that?

-To get rid of the body, so that the old man becomes ashes on the earth. That's what he wanted, right? Not only clinging to the earth, but getting into it like water into the blood.

Pedro made a small moan that I thought was laughter, or maybe regret. I barely saw the faces of my brothers, dark silhouettes whose voices were created and destroyed by speaking and by remaining silent. Then Raúl lit cigarettes and gave one to each of us. Now the cigarette lights moved like fireflies. I thought about Clarisa, who as a girl liked to play catch. He never caught any of it, but Mom played with it and pretended to catch several of it in her hand. She then crouched down to show him her open palm, hiding from us, from the men of the family. The two were whispering and laughing. There was nothing in mom's palm, but Clarisa pretended that there were fireflies trapped, or maybe she really believed it. Mom had the ability to push aside the dark areas and highlight what she wanted us to see: the dead field but soon to be reborn, Dad's obstinacy as a merit given by God, moving as a journey of experience.

Even when she got sick we hardly noticed her absence. It was two months after the old man's arrest. We didn't know when Dad would return, so Raúl had started working the fields to support us, but he would soon abandon him due to his failure. Meanwhile, Father Macabeo came every day, and on Sundays he spent almost the entire afternoon at home. He drank mate, ate with us, read us verses from the Bible. Sometimes he would accompany us to walk through the fields, and he would say that it was not good land. That my father didn't know what he was doing when working on

it. That little by little overcame Raúl's already weak will. Without dad there was no point in trying hard, we felt lost. But the priest was there to help us, to bring us clothes and food. When we went out, Father Macabeo stayed at home with Mom and Clarisa. It was during the afternoons, when my sister took a nap, my mother washed her clothes and her priest, sitting in her chair, watched her work.

At the end of those two months, Mom started feeling sick one night. She served us food and her walk was slow, her forehead shone withperspiration. The priest asked him what was wrong. She replied that it was nothing important. We saw her clutching her belly as if she had cramps, and a while later we heard her vomiting in the back yard.

Father Macabeo wanted to go look for the doctor, and although she insisted from bed that she not do it, he left on horseback. We were left alone with mom. She had a fever, but she kept telling us things. That Pedro would take care of Clarisa, that I would clean up the dinner things. Raúl stayed next to her, and he also commanded us. Then I heard my brother say something to Mom in her ear, and she nodded her head. I wondered if Raúl knew what was happening to the old woman. He sent for hot water to prepare a tizana. He applied it to her as if she knew.

It wasn't until dawn that the doctor and the priest arrived. The doctor examined Mom alone, then spoke with Father Macabeo and left without saying a word to us.

"Her mother is going to be in bed for a few days, so everyone is going to have to collaborate to help her take care of the house and the field," he said. Then he squeezed Clarisa's cheeks, who was next to mom's bed. My sister smiled, mom smiled. Raúl ran out, hitting the priest on the side, without realizing it, I think.

-What was happening to the old woman? -I asked Raúl, this night almost eleven years later, locked in an abandoned ranch and chased by the police.

-What happened to him when?

-When he got sick.

I know my brothers looked at each other in the dim light of the cigarettes.

-We never told him, didn't we? -Raúl told Pedro. He shook his head.

Then my older brother began to tell me what he had seen the day before Mom fell ill. The three of us were in the field. Raúl plowing the little of the land that still seemed fertile, Pedro removing stones from the furrows, I scattering seeds from a bag that I dragged along the ground. It was a very hot day, I remember that very well. The three of us were sweating profusely.

Raúl left the plow tied to the horses and said that he was going to get water home. Pedro and I sat there, waiting.

Raúl said that when he arrived at the ranch at first he didn't see mom anywhere, but the whole house was closed, door and windows, so the darkness inside was almost complete.

-Old! -he called. The dogs appeared from the corner where mom's pallet was. They surrounded Raúl and looked at him as if asking for help.

He heard the sound of cans falling to the ground. He smelled a smell of ferments, of liquids, of burning alcohol. Then he went to open the window, but he heard mom scream. He ran to the bed, and barely seeing what he touched, he felt the trembling body of the old woman, whose clothes were in disarray. Her hands accidentally touched Mom's bare skin. She had her legs spread and her knees raised. When Raúl's eyes adjusted to the darkness, he could see that she was leaning on the bed and with her hands on her lower abdomen. In her hands she had something metallic. Raúl realized that it was something sharp, a screwdriver, perhaps, but that wasn't it. He had boiled it in the water fountain that had fallen on the floor a while before, and Mom was now trying to place it inside her sex.

I don't know if my brother understood what was happening. It was the first time he had seen it, but he was no fool. He must have soon realized it, but he certainly wouldn't know what to do. He said Mom was crying and he wasn't even surprised to see her there. She was in too much pain.

-Help me! –She screamed in a low voice, but with all the strength of her contained throat.

But what was my brother going to do but look at the beginning. His hands were shaking, his tall, skinny teenage body was also shaking with chills as if it were no more than 30 degrees outside. When he saw that Mom was still trying alone and in vain to place that item on her body, he approached and started crying.

-Not now, son! Help me…

And while he said it he made a greater effort and put the metal into his vagina with all his strength. Raúl saw him enter and leave several times, first with blood, then with some pieces of meat, as he thought, which made him nauseous. Then the old woman took out the metal and threw it on the floor. She told Raúl to clean everything up and leave. That we didn't return until late at night.

Raúl returned to the field. We asked him about water and he didn't answer us. We didn't want to work anymore but he hit each of us and we didn't have to continue. He forbade us to return home before he ordered it. He said that he would kill us, and there was such an expression on his face

that we did not dare to doubt that he at least was going to give us the worst beating.

-When we returned, I asked the old woman who he had been.

-What did she answer you?

-Nothing, but I already knew it. You don't have to be very smart to guess it.

I remembered well that Father Macabeo came to take care of mom whileShe remained in bed, but a month later she began to come less. We noticed that Mom and the priest spoke little to each other, sometimes maintaining a silence that lasted all afternoon while they drank mate, looking at the countryside that would never be recovered, which was filled with garbage, with scrap metal that was rusting like their hearts.

Raúl would sit on the floor, not far from the two, and look at them out of the corner of his eye from time to time, she knowing that he knew the truth, and the priest perhaps ignoring him, but seeing that something was shining in my brother's eyes. Raúl would only tell Pedro a while later everything he had seen, which is why Pedro still played with Clarisa and me in the dead fields where the old scarecrows still remained. Those simulations of men who no longer scared anyone, victims of the caranchos that settled in their skinny arms.

twenty

Valverde returned after midnight. He rapped twice on the door, no louder than a bird pecking on wood.

I was the only one awake. My brothers had fallen asleep because they had not gone to bed for two nights. Valverde murmured his name as he knocked, so I opened the door and let him in. The others woke up with a start.

-Calm down, guys. I bring news.- He lifted an oil lamp and prepared to light it. Raúl stopped him.

-Don't worry, there are no police in the area. Tonight we can sleep peacefully.

-But what do you know?

-I come from your field, they guarded the grave. In the town I found out that the judge only authorized the exhumation for tomorrow morning.

-Then tomorrow we leave before the sun and go to the field. We have to light the fire when they have dug up the body.

"But Raúl," I said. We're not going to kill them, are we?

My brother smiled.

-The living have legs to escape, Nicanor. But the dead man is the one who interests us. We have to prevent him from speaking, because even the dead say what happened to them.

Valverde nodded, perhaps he knew this from having dissected animal corpses. I wondered if Raúl was worried about something in particular.

-But if the old woman goes...

"He's not going to go," my brother assured me. "He already said that he didn't want to be dug up." Only the police, the doctor and the commissioner will be there. And they are going to escape from the fire like rats in the field.

We decided to sleep for at least three hours before leaving. Valverde offered to stand guard. We place our trust and our lives in him.

I was woken up by the crowing of the rooster, but it was not yet fully dawn. Raúl and Pedro were already up and washing their faces with the water that came from a pump inside the ranch.

-Why didn't they wake me up sooner? -I protested, believing for a moment that they wanted to leave me out of the matter.

Pedro laughed and kicked me in the arm.

-Don't worry, Nicanor. You also have work to do.

I got up and greeted Valverde, who didn't seem exhausted or tired after the night on duty.

"I would like to help you," he said.

"It's not your business," Raúl answered.

-Come on...we already discussed that...

-Your job is not to burn fields but to raise beasts, so that they persecute you for that and not for ours, do you understand me? Each one to his own and there are no debts to pay...

-But then let me heat up water for you for a cup of tea.

"You can do that," said Pedro.

-What time was the matter?

-The most likely thing is that at half past six they will be in the field. By seven it will all be over.

We decided to hurry. I washed my face and peed in a bin in the corner. I returned to the group that had gathered around a gentle bonfire that Valverde quickly lit. We made three rounds of mate and ate some pieces of meat with leather that were left over from the barbecue they had made at their house two days before. They were hard and cold, but they helped us regain our strength.

Before leaving, Raúl gave Pedro and me two torches that he had prepared during the day with branches. He had found tar that Valverde used to insulate the roof from the rain, and he smeared it on one end. He gave each of us matches and the four of us went out. It was the last time we would see that house, and somehow I felt apprehensive about leaving that refuge for the unknown place that was the outside world. A world that I knew but that was now aggressive and threatening to me. The morning fog gave a strange, rather unreal tone to the small forest next to the river. We ran all the way I had done. It was dawn and it couldn't have been more than five in the morning.

We reached the limit of our field. We hid among the tall sunflowers, which had already begun to wither and stoop. The weight of the flowers was too much for the stems weakened by the bug. I thought of the old man and his hope, of the face he had made when he saw that they turnedsuns grew and every morning they turned their smiling faces to the sun. But the sun is fire, it is a friend of flames. He is the beneficent father of the fires that our father created to erase death and prepare the ground for procreation.

The earth is a womb that the old man wanted to engender, and from which he could only obtain degenerated and deformed products. But he insisted, he prepared the land, he cultivated the womb of the earth just as he engendered in our mother's womb. And in each birth there was a failure that he did not want to see, that he discarded with fire. That's why we didn't get rid of him before he got rid of us. He was a Christ who needed the blood of the sacrificial lambs.

There I can see it, emerging among the tall sunflowers that refuse to die, the same as the thieves who accompanied Christ resisted. But he is only one of three crucified scarecrows, peering out of the mist and proclaiming his worthlessness. His learned task of engendering fear has become the grotesque work of an aging jester.

We looked out onto a path and saw police cars and a truck. Next to the tomb were two guards, Dr. Ruiz, the commissioner and Father Macabeo. Raúl grabbed my shoulder and I looked at him, but he had his eyes on the group gathered around the open grave. He smiled, even he gave a start of boastfulness, of pride in himself, perhaps, as if he were seeing confirmation of something he was eagerly awaiting.

"There's the priest too," I said.

He squeezed my shoulder tightly and lovingly.

-It couldn't be missed, right? -Then he said to Valverde:-Go ahead, thank you for everything.

He gave each of us a hug and ran away. We never met again.

Raúl lit a match and each one brought the tarred torch closer. The flames flared up and the three of us separated as we had planned for the night. Raúl stayed there, at the main exit where the others would escape. If necessary, he would arrest anyone who tried to take the body. He had assured us that they would undoubtedly blame us for the fire, but that they would not be able to prove anything. A few months in jail, perhaps, if they saw us, but nothing concrete to prove that we had started the fire.

Pedro ran towards the eastern sector, which was the back of those who had gathered there. I went towards the northwest field, the largest side of the field. I began to burn the dry stems of the sunflowers and the flames quickly rose and spread to the sides and into the interior of the field. I saw other similar flames rising from where my brothers were.

I heard alarm calls and two shots, but the police had fired into the air to surely warn the townspeople. I ran back to where Raúl was and stayed with him, covering him with the shotgun in case they tried to catch him. He knew that Pedro would have to go all the way around the field and it was not certain that he could get there with that fire. Then Raúl and I hid among the rows of still undamaged sunflowers and saw the group emerge one after the other. The first was Dr. Ruiz, then a man we had not seen before, perhaps a lawyer or a court clerk. They were shouting things, but I couldn't understand them. The crackling of the plants burning was louder than I expected.

The smoke began to get so thick that I couldn't see if any more people were coming out along the main path. Raúl motioned for me to wait where he was and not expose myself. He looked out onto the path to see if anyone was missing. A fat guy knocked him to the ground in his run. I realized he was the commissioner, but I don't think the officer realized who he had bumped into. The smoke was very thick and I started coughing myself, afraid of suffocating. Then I also went out onto the road and tried to get Raúl who was on the ground, as if stunned by the blow.

He stood up and spat out bloody saliva. He motioned for me to leave, but I didn't. I stayed behind him in case he needed me. Raúl had the torch in his right hand, and with it he tried to illuminate himself as he entered the path that led to the grave. I grabbed his clothes and tried to stop him, but he didn't listen to me. I didn't know what he was trying to do, maybe see if anyone was left.

I heard a voice calling for help. The voice was getting closer, broken, lost among the crackling of the flames. I thought I recognized who it was, and not long after I saw the cassock and the figure of Father Maccabeus among the smoke. He covered his nose with a sleeve, his head was covered in soot. He didn't look forward until he was near the exit and almost in front of Raúl.

I knew then that my brother wouldn't let him out.

Raúl threw the torch over the short stretch of road that separated them, and a new barrier of flames went up that prevented the priest from escaping. we saw him runfrom side to side. She must have had an expression of terror on her face, but we could only guess it by the desperation of her flailing arms and the screams similar to the howls of a cornered animal.

Then Father Maccabeus fell to the ground and we didn't see him again.

But another person appeared running after him. Someone we had forgotten because we didn't even suspect that he might show up that morning. Someone who had gone to honor the old man because he perhaps loved him more than my brother Raúl had been able to love him in his entire life.

Behind us was our sister Clarisa.

THE BLIND DOGS

1

Probably, he said to himself, when the president looked in the mirror that same morning while he was shaving and saw half of his face covered in soap and the other clean and shaved, he already knew he had been abandoned by the men in his cabinet. The rest, as Hamlet had said when he died listening to the arrival of Fortinbras' army, is just silence fueled by weapons.

"It's not a good time to travel, Mateo," Alma said, while he gave a bottle to his almost two-year-old son.

Ibáñez changed the radio dial. It was late afternoon and all the news programs continued broadcasting on the national network. He looked for some of his favorite stations, but they were dead or the martial rhythm of a military march was playing, and in some others the strident and discordant brass of the anthem played by a band of schoolboys could be heard. It had been forty-eight hours since the coup, and he imagined the now former president on the day of being overthrown. He had trusted him, had voted for him, even considered it correct, for a few months, to compare him to Kennedy. And even though he had not met his expectations and had only died politically, the comparison was valid in a more intimate and human way, closer to a close complicity than to the random vicissitudes of political factors.

Mateo Ibáñez wondered if coincidence exists in politics. No, it wasn't possible. Only the military believes in chance, because they allow themselves to be governed by their hearts. The problem is that they confuse the voices of their hearts with the icy reason of their brains. Training is that, perhaps, accustoming the muscle to hunger and cold, overpowering it like a stray dog, beating it until pity is nothing more than a corpse and the dubious virtue of strength is driven, pushed and revived by the motivations of the heart.

As a doctor, he did not believe in the ridiculous localities that romantics assign to feelings. He knew that sometimes reason is an impulse more virtuous than what the brain is capable of creating, and then it comes from an unexplored place in the chest, a region between the paths of the blood, where the bushes and trees of the bones form beautiful houses like heavenly mansions. He also knew that what we call the heart sometimes focuses on a point in the abdomen, like a tickling that indicates growth, perhaps the transfer, the change of the viscera, trying to accommodate the furnishing of human rooms to make them consistent with behavior. , perhaps to the intimate information that each one inherits, the particular constitution and the peculiar synthesis of an entire life enclosed in the codes of a cell.

For that they had called him to La Plata. They had requested his services from the Ministry of Health to investigate, give their opinion or give indications, at least, of a fact that the officials could not explain. A few months before, perhaps a couple of years if you consider the isolated stories that were never reported, strange animals had appeared on the streets of the city. In the last four months, the animals were of the same type: dogs of an unknown breed, although they were probably mixed breeds, Ibáñez thought. He did not doubt the capacity and intelligence of his colleagues in La Plata, nor of the ministry officials, even though he knew from his own experience the government's stupidity and the accommodating positions determined by hand out of personal interests or in payment of political favors, even granted for what fear tends to call sometimes gratitude, other times blackmail. In those cases, nothing more was to be expected than a chaotic profile recorded in reports and enormous columns of explanations and verbiage that were of no use except to fill pages and folders that after four months must have been piling up and bending the already full ones. shelves of a ministry invaded by humidity and gnawed by rats during the nights.

Ibáñez accepted. They told him that he would be part of a commission along with a veterinarian, another doctor in the area and an architect. Why the architect, there washe asked. The dogs, if that was what they were, they told him, hid in various places throughout the city, in shelters and hiding places that must have constituted temporary burrows because when the brigades arrived there was nothing left but a nauseating smell of urine and rotting meat. .

After a long time and several kilometers, in which he saw small towns, gas stations and milestones indicating the distance from Buenos Aires pass by, Mateo answered his wife:

-What are the good times, then, my love?

-I'm talking about what's happening, you already heard what they said on the radio. There are soldiers everywhere.

He already knew it, all he had to do was look at the patrol posts and military trucks on the sides of the road. They stopped some cars, but they had not yet given them any signal. Perhaps, he told himself, his newly purchased Falcon was a hint to those gentlemen dressed in moss green, imposing a fashion that he guessed would last much longer than a season. But all this was speculation, labyrinths of his mind through which restlessness and melancholic fantasy led him to which he felt an inevitable attraction. It's true, he would have recognized Alma, these are times to stay home and watch the spectacle of the world as someone watching the preparations for a war that has just begun. He remembered having read a poem with that phrase, by a certain Cecilia Tejada. That tragic vision had impressed him like an epic poem. It was just a matter of survival, even more so if you had a wife and a small child to protect. But men, he told himself,

have always gone out to fight. They have locked their women under four keys to go out into the open field and kill the enemy.

We are not, however, he insisted on telling himself while driving, in the Middle Ages, we are not in a jungle but in a civilized society, which no matter how violent it may be, preserves its laws and is watched by thousands of expert and sagacious eyes, thousands of glances that have the power to judge with the weapons of virtue and justice. From the outside they look at us, that is a consolation. They will not let us get hurt, they will be our benevolent parents, our advisors and friends, our protectors. They will punish those who wrong us and impose peace. The problem, Ibáñez thought as he approached a police detachment packed with soldiers, is whether the borders will be retaining walls or sharp barbed wire. A wall can be demolished with a shell, but fences with barbed wire reveal barbarism and torture without the judges being able to cross the fence without getting hurt, without the calloused hands of an old wise man, the last bastion of the human code, bleeding. , and those glorious fingers that have written the rules of justice are bruised, and their tendons severed forever as the connections of a brain are severed. Inert, unresponsive hands, fallen next to those fences like pieces of a body that dogs have chewed until they were satisfied, or perhaps not completely satisfied yet.

Mateo and Alma saw with growing fear the signal that a soldier was giving them right in front of the car, moving only his left arm, while he held the rifle with his right. Mateo stopped on the side of the road and watched him approach the window. He knew he should lower it, but there was an apprehension that made him prolong his decision even a few more seconds, as if that glass were a last protective barrier. He was afraid. Alone, he would have felt that strange shame that arises in ordinary men when faced with any kind of power. But there were his wife and his son, and not only did he fear for them, he felt an uncertain fury, of unknown origin and unmotivated cause.

The soldier said something, barely moving his lips because the helmet strap on his chin only allowed a slight grimace of his mouth. Anyway, he understood, because the soldier with an up and down rifle movement was indicating the same thing to him. He turned the handle and rolled down the window.

"Good afternoon, officer," he said, forcing a smile that he believed was necessary to try to erase that slight suspicion that he had seen emerging on the soldier's face, and to also scare away the fear that he saw emerging from behind the fields that the route crossed, from even beyond the coast that he guessed hundreds of kilometers to his left. As if the broad rose to warn him, as if the sky of the incipient twilight were a mirror specially created to announce the arrival of a lesser god, but no less powerful than the forces that now seemed to grow from the earth in the form of men, simply men but bearers of machines that could kill like the teeth of an animal.

The soldier didn't say anything, or if he said something he didn't understand it with that incomprehensible way of speaking. It was funny how soldiers yell at each other when training, but whenWhen they talk to civilians, their voice sounds hoarse, almost incomprehensible to the ear, like guttural voices, short and isolated words, sometimes disjointed.

Mateo took his handbag out of the glove compartment. He glanced askance at his wife, who looked back at him with irritated eyes while she tried to calm Blas's crying. His son was crying harder now, but he tried to control himself by searching for the car registration and papers. He handed them to the soldier, who looked at them for a long time, as if he was having trouble reading. But he knew that wasn't it. It was part of the theater, he told himself, the rites of a sect, patience pushed to the limit waiting for signs of fear. The soldier turned the car around, not once but twice. In the second, Ibáñez did not hide his concern, while the child's crying irritated him and prevented him from thinking. What's going on, damn? What the fuck is going on. He thought about the officials he knew, about who he could call if problems arose. Nothing in his life indicated any crime or concealment. He was a doctor, he was a family man. He had a car in order and an apartment that he paid in installments. He did not get involved in politics, and his opinions were always kept behind closed doors. But the walls hear, the neighbors have ears, and any word, any one, lacks all innocence, always.

The soldier returned.

-Where are you going, doctor?

-To La Plata, officer, I was summoned by the Ministry of Health, you can check it if you want.

Just as he finished speaking he regretted having said the last thing. Those who do not have a straw tail do not need to give references. But it was already said, and anyway who could understand the rules of that moment.

"Good afternoon," was the only thing the officer responded, bowing after returning the papers, then walking away towards another car that had been stopped behind.

Ibáñez closed the window and looked at Alma. They smiled at each other and he put it in first gear and returned to the road. Blas continued crying. Alma searched in her bag for the thermos of warm milk. Filling the bottle, he offered it to his son, who at first refused and Alma yelled at her.

Mateo took his right hand off the steering wheel and began to caress his wife's hair.

-Don't worry, love, nothing happened, you see.

She hugged Blas more tightly, eager to be forgiven, while the child began to drink again and the crying turned into a placid and serene gurgling, a noise with the smell of warm milk that invaded the interior of the car like a weaker substance. and yet more persistent than iron.

2

There were no more than twenty minutes to reach the entrance to the city. It was getting dark and the car lights turned on like lamps that old machines used to make their way through dark forests. Suddenly, the cars seemed as ancient to him as the legendary war machines of the Middle Ages, catapults loaded on enormous contraptions built from logs, sliding slowly on uneven-surfaced wooden wheels over the even more uneven surface of mud and dead bodies that they were leaving behind them. Was he perhaps just another member of that commune of machine-men, making his way through devastated fields over which darkness was laying out its sheet mercifully woven with the threads of oblivion and the needles of death?

He wanted to push away such thoughts. He turned the radio back on. He turned the dial one after another, trying almost desperately to find something other than speeches and military marches. On National Radio he expected to find more of the same, but it was Saturday night and at that time he usually listened to the classical music program. To his surprise, there it was: music instead of words, the faint sound of the bassoon instead of the throat-clearing sounds of old soldiers.

-Will Blas like it? –He asked, looking for a second at his wife in her eyes.

She smiled at him and yawned, still gently squeezing her son against her chest.

-Yes, he's going to calm him down until we get to the hotel. "Thank you from her," she said, rubbing her shoulder against her husband's, resting her head and closing her eyes.

It wasn't Beethoven, but it didn't matter. She did not yet recognize the melody, the tone, the turns and the shadows of the author. He seemed to be somewhat Russian, in that he was sure not to be mistaken. It was a soprano who sang, but not an opera, but an orchestral lieder. He heard the sound of the record pick jump and recoil a few times. Ibáñez only had to laugh, and he saw that Alma did the same without opening her eyes.

-We are sorry for the interruption, dear listeners. After this technical failure, we resumed listening to The Dances and Songs of Death, by Modesto Mussorgsky. First, the Lullaby.

Then the soprano sang again after a very brief orchestral prelude. This time the pick ran over the damaged groove with a slight click that Mateo didn't even pay attention to. He was cold, he closed the window on her side and passed his manot right on his wife's shoulders. There was not complete darkness yet, but the shadow overtook the field and the road, and the dying sunlight was a sadder sign than the absolute darkness. The lights of the city were emerging, all together forming a huge moon without a defined shape, humiliating the setting sun like a beaten dog.

He had heard those songs several times, but always in a baritone voice. Today, however, a woman's voice gave a more chilling aspect to the brief plot of those songs. The Lullaby was not an innocent song, but the song of death that came to alleviate the suffering of a child.

"My God..." said Ibáñez.

-As...? –Alma asked.

Did she not realize? Was that woman's voice so similar to hers that she didn't recognize the tragic, premonitory nuances, perhaps? Mateo only knew that a lump had formed in his throat and he could not pronounce what he needed to ask. Is death a woman, after all? Are we men simply studs who generate bodies so that they can expel them into the world and then take them away again?

My God, he thought, not daring to remove that lullaby that seemed to be being dedicated to his son.

"You're shaking," Alma said.

-A chill, nothing more. Get ready for the baby, we'll arrive in a little while.

She rubbed her eyes with one hand and began to put the coffee and mate things, the bibs, and Blas's bottle back into the bag.

They entered the city at night. He hardly knew it, but the street numbering helped him find the hotel where the municipality had reserved rooms for the members of the commission. They passed through cobblestone streets, surrounded by trees whose canopies intertwined above, even higher than the traditional houses. It was a beautiful city, Ibáñez told himself.

-Would you like to live here? –He asked his wife. They had talked about it several times, but he would have to leave state employment to move to the provincial level, and his salary was somewhat lower. However, there were compensations, a quieter and more familiar place, surely cleaner, than the streets of Buenos Aires and the suburbs.

The mercury lights peeked through the branches, and the car's wheels clattered on the cobblestones. The ditches in the corners were deep, but

invited a quiet trip. The lights from the houses illuminated the sidewalks where the children played, running around the mothers who were talking, or crossing the street on bicycles. Some old women came out of a warehouse with woven bags full of merchandise, others looked out a window and watched the cars pass by whose owners were returning home after work. There was a smell of honeysuckle, sometimes of eucalyptus, sometimes of roast meat that came from the patios.

"I think I would like it," she replied.

-While we are here, we can consult with some auctioneers...

-Do you know how long the investigation will last?

-I have no idea, my love. This idea of unknown animals seems crazy to me. I hope my colleagues are of sound mind.

-Do you know them?

-They didn't even tell me the names, all this seems improvised to me, and right now with the coup...

He knew that one thing had nothing to do with the other, just like the song on the radio. It was a feeling exclusively his that he tried to relate things by their thinnest ends, more prone to fraying when the pincers of reason tried to catch them. He had lowered the volume to an almost inaudible limit, but Blas woke up crying again. Then he turned off the radio and stopped in front of the hotel.

-We arrived.

It was a small hotel, three stars as stated in the window. A hallway with a television and three armchairs. Further back, a dining room with tables and white linen tablecloths and high-backed chairs that looked very uncomfortable.

The concierge met him behind the counter.

-What is offered to the gentlemen?

-We are Dr. Ibáñez and Mrs. We have reservations.

The man consulted a list and smiled.

-That's right, doctor, it's a pleasure to have you with us, as well as his lovely lady and the beautiful baby.

Alma couldn't help but sneer, which she tried to hide. I looked at her and winked. The conserve was a short guy, scrawny and smarmy in the way he spoke. He had a subdued mannerism that contrasted with thick, manly mustaches that looked false on his childish face. He had gray hair and must

have been over fifty years old, but he still retained the expression of a shy teenager who had aged before his time.

-Please sign here, doctor. Everything is paid for now, including all meals and full room service.

Ibáñez did as he was asked and the janitor told him that the bellman would bring him the equipment. aje. All of this was artificial inside that small, simple hotel.

-Your suitcases, doctor?

-In the car.

The man snapped two fingers and the boy ran to the door for Ibáñez to accompany him.

-The bellman will tell you the parking lot. Please accompany me, Madam Doctor.

Alma burst out laughing and I turned to get out of there before the janitor felt completely humiliated.

"Excuse me, sir," she said, it wasn't my intention, but I'm not a doctor, just the wife.

The man coughed and placed a hand on his chest, bowing slightly.

-Forgive me, Mrs. Ibáñez, it was an unforgivable mistake on my part.

-Don't worry about her.- She squeezed his arm, briefly but affectionately, and the janitor looked at her with an expression in which he seemed to want to tell her that from now on he would dedicate her life to her.

Alma followed him to the room, unable to stop smiling. When I tell Mateo, we're going to stop laughing all night, that's what he must have been thinking. She entered the sober room, with white curtains that the janitor drew with a broad gesture, as if he were drawing the curtain of a theater.

-I hope you like it, Mrs. Ibáñez.

-Yes it is, it seems familiar, intimate, right?

The janitor smiled so satisfied that he seemed to be restraining his urge to jump around Alma like a dog saved from rain and hunger by the most charitable woman in the world.

-You are an expert, madam. The doctor's colleagues have come alone, so you and your little son are a pleasant touch among so many scientists.

To avoid laughing again, Alma asked:

-But I imagine we won't be the only guests.

-At this time of year, I must admit that this is the case. "Mea culpa," she said, closing her eyes for a moment and hitting her chest with her fist. "If it weren't for the fact that I'm a hardhead... Look, Mrs. Ibáñez, I'm an old-fashioned man." This hotel is my life, and although they have offered me to sell it, I don't dare let go of these walls. They want to build a more luxurious, larger hotel, they know that my accounts tend to turn red every month, you understand what I mean. But I am surviving, and here you will find me when death comes.

The man closed his eyelids again and beat his chest, but this time with his head upright, like a soldier listening for the last time to the martial drums of the national anthem.

Then he said goodbye, without accepting a tip. He raised his hands and shook his head several times, bowed several times before closing the door, timidly looking up to take away one last memory of the beautiful face of his benefactor.

Alma sat on the bed and couldn't help but laugh. Blas woke up and started crying, then he realized that the janitor could have heard her and he felt ashamed, but the crying must have hidden his laughter. He began to change the boy's clothes. He sang her a nursery rhyme that used to calm him down, the baby smiled and crawled on the bed. The duvet had a musty smell, like almost everything in the hotel, but there was not a single speck of dust. He checked the bathroom and it was clean, he looked inside the built-in closet, and the smell of mothballs made her sneeze. Blaise yelled something at her, she ran to hug him.

At that moment the door opened and Mateo entered with the suitcases. Behind came the boy with the bags where Mateo had his work papers and some surgical instruments. She had asked him before leaving why he was taking them, if in the city they would give him everything he needed. But he was used to his things, his chisels, his bone saws, the scalpel handles, the tweezers and scissors that he worked best with. Mateo stopped to look at the room, seemed satisfied and looked at his wife.

-How about?

-Good...

-If it doesn't convince you, we'll go to another hotel. Look, we can spend several weeks here.

-But they pay us everything, Mateo. On top of the little they are going to compensate you, are you going to spend it on your stay?

-They should pay me for the place that I decide...

Alma looked at him like a mother who doesn't know if her son is stupid or too naive.

"I know, I know..." Mateo said. "Then he hugged her and kissed her.

Blas was on all fours, watching them attentively. Suddenly they remembered that they had another spectator, the suitcase boy.

-Forgive me, kid. Leave your bags on the bed. "Here..." he told him, putting some coins in his vest pocket.

The boy dropped the bags on the mattress, and he didn't seem to notice Blas. The baby remained locked up, showing no more fright than surprise. Mateo and Alma looked at each other, but decided to ignore it. The boy was as deluded as the old man.

-I'm going to take a shower, I'm tired from the trip.

-I'll unpack the suitcases, love.

-Only what we need for dinner, there is time tomorrow.

Then Alma began to tell him the conversation. sation with the janitor, while she went back and forth hanging Mateo's shirts and pants, organizing the underwear in the drawers and the shoes at the foot of the bed. From the shower you could hear Mateo Ibáñez's laughter, loud and dense, gurgling from the water that was getting into his mouth.

"If you're going to drown, I won't tell you more," she said, leaning out of the bathroom door.

Mateo opened the shower curtain and said:

-Don't you dare deprive me of that, we will tell everyone when we return to Buenos Aires.

He pulled out of her and shook her hair, Alma protested and he grabbed her hand, pressed her against her body and kissed her.

-No, Mateo, not now, we have to get dressed for dinner. I just called and they told me that in half an hour they will close the kitchen.

He resigned himself.

-Did you meet any of the commission? –she asked him while he shaved.

-The janitor told me that everyone arrived yesterday, but I didn't see any of them. They are in their rooms or walking around the city.

-We are the only ones in the entire hotel, didn't you know?

Mateo came out of the bathroom with half his face covered in soap and a towel around his waist. He continued shaving while he asked:

-Are you sure?

-My suitor told me -and he started to laugh. –It says they came without their families, or they are single.

"How strange," he said, returning to the bathroom with a worried expression.

She didn't notice that, and she started to choose something to wear to dinner.

-I need the bathroom, love.

-I'll leave it to you...

-Everything dirty, for sure.

Mateo walked out and shrugged.

"At least take care of Blas while I change," she said.

He took off his towel and looked for underwear in his suitcase.

"Your mother already stored everything in the closet, Blas, I imagined it," she murmured.

He chose a pair of boxers, a pair of stockings, and a tank top. He put on his pants and shirt. He looked everywhere for a mirror, until it occurred to her to look on the inside of one of the closet doors. It had brown spots and broken, sharp edges, but it was still useful. He looked for a sports jacket and looked in the mirror. He still did not have the paunch that would characterize him much later, but rather a slight prominence on his tall, lanky body. He wore his reddish hair a little long, but he liked the way he looked. He looked at the tired circles under his eyes. He had all day Sunday before starting work. Maybe I'll get used to this city, he told himself.

She realized that Blas was watching him attentively from the bed. He was a quiet child for his age. Except when something irritated him, he used to stay still for several hours at a time, even if he didn't sleep. He always had attentive eyes with a shine that reminded him of his mother's. Mateo sat on the bed and put Blas on his knees. He began to rock it by lifting his heels, carrying a rhythm that he didn't pay attention to at first, then he realized it was the melody of Mussorgsky's Lullaby. He stopped, recognizing himself as strange, as if another had invaded his familiar privacy.

Alma came out of the bathroom wearing a short-sleeved red dress. The skirt was somewhat narrow but not too tight. Her neckline showed off the pearl necklace that he had given her for the wedding. She had washed her head and his brown curls looked shiny.

-How do I look to your colleagues?

She didn't need to ask, she knew he loved her, and that was enough. It wasn't sentimentality or all that pink lovers stuff, but a wisdom that neither of them had learned in any school nor had anyone mentioned to them. Still, there are things that must be said, because even what silence implies can to be confused, transformed by the little seeds of evil that inhabit the air we breathe.

-More beautiful than when we got married.

She smiled and went up to kiss him. They fell back onto the bed and Blas watched them serenely.

Mateo noticed that Alma was looking at her son like he had noticed her doing before.

"You never noticed how she looks at us, especially me," she said.

-I already noticed, a while ago he was staring at me while I was getting dressed.

-I do not mean that. He doesn't seem to think about anything when he looks at me, he smiles, he even laughs, he calls me mom and then he gets distracted with other things. But when he looks at me I'm afraid of him.

-Do not say foolishness...

-Is seriously. Sometimes it occurs to me that he sees something in me, something that I don't know. When I'm alone I look in the mirror and try to find that something that he can see.

Mateo didn't know what to say, he caressed her curls, pulled the ringlets and watched them form again. He buried his face in Alma's hair and began to lift her skirt.

-No Mateo, he already told you no.

-Let's order something to eat in the room...

-You have to have dinner with your colleagues...seriously, let me go, please, you're going to wrinkle my dress.

He had no choice but to listen to her. She began to dress Blas. ANDThe boy got out of bed and started crawling towards the bathroom.

"He wants to pee..." Mateo said, picking him up to carry him.

Five minutes later, they turned off the light in the room, closed the door and went down the stairs that led to the dining room. There were three men dining, each at a different table. They turned around when they heard Blas's high-pitched voice trying to say something that his parents only understood precisely later, when they heard the barking of the dogs in the street. Blas

pointed with his outstretched arm towards the sidewalk and said: the dogs, the dogs.

3

The three men looked at them. One was at a table next to the wall, he was the only one who did not turn his back on the Ibáñez. He was somewhat short, robust but not fat, with a round, blonde face, and already with little hair although he couldn't have been more than thirty years old. He was wearing a dark blue suit, its corresponding vest with countless buttons, a white shirt and a colored tie that completed a neat and excessively careful ensemble. Seeing them, he raised his head slightly and wiped his lips with the napkin he had placed on his lap.

The other two had their backs turned and turned around when they heard the boy. One was tall, very skinny, with curly light brown hair, long sideburns, and a few days' worth of beard. He was wearing a black shirt and jeans, with a sweater on his shoulders. He looked at them with those eyes that writers find it pleasant to call tipsy, with a mixture of amusement and slight malice, sarcasm or disenchantment, perhaps. Mateo thought he recognized the third man. He was a small guy, with a body in proportion to his height, a thin, white face, hair with short, dark curls, and a clean-shaven boat. He was wearing a green sweater that looked like it was hand-knit, a corduroy shirt, and pleated pants made of the same fabric. He gave the impression that the clothes were too big on him, they didn't look bad but they did look incongruous, not very in keeping with his body shape, or as if someone else, perhaps his wife, had told him how to do it, without caring too much about how. I went out into the street. This was the first one to get up from the chair, very quickly, shaking the glass on the table and approached Mateo.

-Doctor Ibáñez, it's a pleasure to see you again!

Mateo tried to remember, the other realized his doubt, and waited.

-Doctor Ruiz! We met at the level crossing accident, didn't we?

They both shook hands for almost a minute, smiling knowingly and with a strange happiness that the others were oblivious to.

-They didn't tell me it was about you, if I had known I would have come with more enthusiasm. “I had to cancel consultations and work in the field,” said Ruiz.

-You have to tell me about your life since we didn't see each other, but let me introduce you to my family. This is my wife, Alma, and my son Blas. – Then he told Alma:-Bernardo and I met the day Blas was born, when he had to leave me for that accident, do you remember?

She nodded and shook hands with Ruiz.

-It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Ibáñez.

-Call me Alma, please.

Then the tall man approached. He looked strange in the dim light of the dining room (the janitor and owner seemed eager to save money by installing low-power lamps), tall and somewhat stooped, he looked at the others with the joy of a boy and the disenchanted smile of an old man.

-This is Dr. Dergan, the veterinarian.

-Mauricio for everyone, since we are going to work together for a while.- And he shook hands with Ibáñez and his wife.

-Dergan and I come from the same town, but we hadn't seen each other for a few years. “It was a pleasure meeting here,” said Ruiz.

-Why didn't they tell us who the members of the commission were before coming?

-I guess because they didn't know, it all seems very improvised.

-That's what I told my wife the same way.

Ruiz walked away a little and called:

-Architect, please come closer.

The man in the suit stood up and walked towards them with more confidence. Ruiz introduced him.

-The architect feels somewhat isolated between us, according to what he told me.

Marquez blushed. He was shyer than he seemed. His voice was sweet and very soft. You had to pay close attention to him when he spoke.

-I will collaborate with you as much as I can, doctors. I told those who called me that perhaps an engineer would be better, but anyway, if they pay us...

Everyone laughed, although it did not seem to be the architect's intention to make a joke. He was one of those introverted and serious types, who on the few occasions when they try to be funny or join a group have the sad virtue of sounding out of place or even ridiculous. This time it wasn't like that at all. His response served to break the ice a little of the presentations

in that dim dining room, where the silence of the street due to the late hour was only interrupted from time to time by the barking of dogs.

"Let's sit down, please," Ruiz said. Then they found the janitor, standing in the middle of the dining room with his hands behind his back.

-The kitchen has closed, gentlemen.

-But don't come with nonsense -Dergan said.- The doctor and his family haven't had dinner yet.

-But employees have their schedule...

-Then serve whatever you have.

-It is not our custom to lower the quality of our gastronomy.

Ruiz gave Mateo a knowing look, as if to say: you see, doctor, what kind of guys and places they hand us over to.

Ibáñez had an idea. He whispered in her wife's ear and she winked at him. Alma approached the janitor with the child in her arms.

-I know it's an inconvenience, but my son is hungry, he only took his bottle. –Then she placed a hand on the man's forearm.

Then the other lowered his head, and like an embarrassed servant, he said:

-I couldn't forgive myself for that carelessness, my dear lady. I beg you to excuse my enormous stupidity in front of such a gracious lady. I will go and prepare something myself for you and the estimable doctor.

When he went into the kitchen, everyone burst into secret laughter. Márquez laughed without a sound, Ruiz shook his shoulders, and Dergan held his head back.

"I hope he didn't hear us, I feel sorry for him," said Alma.

-Don't worry, he's either used to it or he doesn't realize it. But why did they all have dinner separately, Bernardo?

-Because the janitor decided so. He said it's hotel rules. The tables are shared only by families. He shrugged his shoulders, resigned.

-But we are going to solve the matter right now –Dergan said. He began to arrange the tables and chairs. When the others saw what he wanted to do, they helped him. Márquez effortlessly lifted his table and joined it to the other two. Ibáñez brought napkins and glasses from a shelf. They didn't expect much from the concierge, and it was enough that he brought them food.

The four men and Alma sat around the tables, and the boy in a high chair that Mateo found stored in a corner of the dining room. He should have dusted it off before seating his son there. Immediately some complaints were heard from the kitchen, soon silenced. They didn't know if there was a cook, but the voice with which the janitor was arguing was that of the bellman.

-Will it be the boy who cooks? –Alma asked

"I hope not, he seems like a fool," said Mateo. "A while ago he almost crushed us with the suitcases." And what about his life, Bernardo?

-I got married a year ago, now I spend half of my time in La Plata and the other half in my wife's town, Le coer antique, very small and I don't think I know it. Her family has fields, and she stayed because she is pregnant and they take care of her.

"I congratulate you, Bernardo," said Alma.

Ruiz thanked, returning a smile in which one could read a peaceful and sad feeling of anguish, as if he suddenly wanted to leave that hotel and return to the town.

-I can't stand being away from her for a long time, that's why I wasn't sure I would accept.

The janitor appeared with a plate of spaghetti which he served to Alma. Then he came back with another one for Ibáñez.

-And for the child?- Dergan said.

The janitor coughed.

"I don't know what a child of that age eats..." the janitor acknowledged.

Nobody said anything, although there were hidden smiles. They saw that the man was ashamed. Overwhelmed, too, by a decaying hotel, unpayable debts, the threat of closure, staff quitting, and now they, guests paid by the state who came to disrupt the order he had created and maintained for years.

-Please, Mr. Ansaldi, prepare a pumpkin puree, if possible, and will you have boiled chard?

"I'll do it for you right now," and he ran away.

"Thank goodness we have it, Mrs. Ibáñez..." said Márquez.

-Walter, don't be so formal, we are among friends. We should get to know each other more since we are going to spend some time together.

The architect looked at Ruiz with gratitude.

"The doctor is right... I mean Bernardo..." Alma said, and she laughed at herself. "Call me Alma, architect... I mean... Walter."

The men celebrated the mistake, and Blas looked at them all, also daring to emit something resembling a breathy laugh. The janitor appeared with food for the child. He quietly set down his plate, bowed, and retired, not to the kitchen, but to the reception. They then saw him close the hotel doors and turn off the main lights in the lobby. Only a floor lamp remained illuminating the sofas, one facing the turned off television and the other facing the street.

-Do you know anything about what we have to investigate? –Mateo asked Ruiz.

"Let's not talk about work, gentlemen, we have the weekend to rest," said Dergan.

Ruiz looked at him coldly, and without paying attention to him, he responded to Ibáñez.

-They told me that these are dog-like animals, although I highly doubt that they are anything more than hungry dogs, a kind of pack that goes fromI went from place to place in the city looking for food. Since no one feeds them, I assume they eat rats, cats and other animals. They have found garbage cans scattered everywhere, but that is what any stray dog from the street does.

-But did they catch anyone? – Marquez asked.

-They say yes, although I did not see the body. Those in charge of the anti-rabies institute cremated him after dissecting him. One is an acquaintance of mine, and according to him the dog was white, without ears, only the external ear hole, not very tall, robust like a bull dog.

"I think I've seen them somewhere before..." Dergan said, thoughtfully, and looked at Ruiz looking for a sign of assent, perhaps. He got nothing, except that he looked at him with suspicion.

-What I don't understand is how we are going to catch one -Márquez asked.- I hope the police or the pound help us.

-They are fumigating and flooding the sewers with toxic gas. This morning I saw the trucks as I arrived at the hotel.

The front door opened. But it was not the entrance of a probable new guest that surprised everyone, but the noise coming in from the street. The barking of the dogs was now intense, with low and deep tones, almost forming an echo on top of the other, increased and prolonged through those streets whose diagonal diagram was slowly beginning to form in everyone's imagination. As if the barking were a pencil mark on a map of that city of

diagonals, moving and creating streets that did not seem to exist before, or at least unimportant before the dogs arrived.

Then Alma realized that Blas had gotten off the chair.

-Blas! She looked under the table, then around it, and she stood up scared. She looked towards the reception and saw him staggering towards the front door. Mateo told his wife not to worry.

"He doesn't usually run away like other kids, but sometimes we can't take our eyes off him," she said to her colleagues.

Alma picked up the child but he was crying and screaming. Extending his little arm he said something that she didn't understand at first. When Mateo approached, she said:

-Yes, my love, the woof-woofs are outside, but you have to go to sleep now, tomorrow you will see them.

The boy stopped crying and stretched out his arms toward his father. Alma handed it to him and the boy hugged Mateo's neck. He kept saying woof-woof.

-The cocks can bite you, my love. Your dad is going to see them tomorrow and he is going to tell you if you can touch them- Alma said.

-We're going to bed, it's a shame we can't stay after dinner...

"Don't worry," said Ruiz, although we could have a coffee after they put the boy to bed, what do you think?

-But the kitchen is closed...

"I offer to prepare it," Márquez said in a low voice, so that the janitor wouldn't hear them.

The man who had entered with a suitcase left with a hostile attitude. Ansaldi approached them to say goodbye.

-What was happening to that man? –Alma asked.

-He wanted a room, but the only ones in good condition are his. It seems that the man was offended, what are we going to do? If they need something at night they know the bellboy is available. I lock the entrance, but if due to some emergency, God forbid, you have to leave, you can have it at the counter. Good night.

She left, hiding a yawn, towards a room behind the reception.

4

The Ibáñez family went up to her room and put Blas to bed. The boy kept murmuring wow-woof still half asleep. Alma did not want to accompany Mateo for coffee. She was tired and worried that Blas would wake up. Mateo went down to the dining room. He found the others smoking. Márquez was returning from the kitchen with cups still empty, but he could already smell the aroma of coffee.

-Do they have an excellent espresso machine, does anyone like it special?

"A mocha coffee, garçon," Dergan joked.

Ibáñez had already noticed the veterinarian's intense French accent.

-Have you been in the country for a long time? –He asked her.

-Almost twenty years ago. We met Ruiz in town.

Mateo looked at Bernardo, who confirmed in silence. He didn't insist.

-And you, Walter?

-I am from Buenos Aires, but I have a couple of works here in La Plata.

-Yesterday the architect took me to a mansion that he built, it is huge. But he had problems...

Márquez seemed uncomfortable with that comment.

-Well, yes, there was a collapse in one sector...

-And the architect was trapped...

-Well, yes, but nothing happened to me.

-Except for the lame leg...

Márquez put a hand on his right leg, like a reflex.

-But he is healing me...

Everyone remained in silence. They didn't expect that when they planned the after-dinner coffee.

-Let's go to the street... -Dergan proposed.- The taxi driver who brought me from the station told me about some whore houses.

"You're an idiot, Mauricio!" said Ruiz. -Don't you realize that Ibáñez is with the faMilia?

Dergan put the cigarette in his mouth and made an apologetic gesture, but it was clear that he didn't see the problem.

"I appreciate the intention, Dergan," said Mateo. "You go, if you want."

-None of that, Mateo.- Let's go out and get some air. It will help you get to know the surroundings a little.

They got up and looked for the key to the entrance. It was with a red ribbon hanging from a hook on the wall. They left and Márquez was in charge of closing the door. A garbage truck passed by outside. When he walked away, they heard the barking, although more distant. It was cold and Mateo had not brought a coat. The four of them lit cigarettes and began to walk in silence. Bernardo pointed out some well-known houses and businesses in the neighborhood. Some families were his patients and he attended a clinic nearby. They walked five blocks and reached the corner of a small but cozy square, with wooden benches, mercury lights that gave a gloomy light despite the intensity.

-That is the Casas bakery, beyond that is Valverde's pharmacy. He is another neighbor from my town who moved a while ago. The woman is sick but he won't let me take care of her. He says she can handle it on her own, but I doubt she has a title.

"I'm sure she doesn't have it," Dergan added.

Mateo would have liked to ask why they weren't reporting him, but he believed that was becoming unfriendly too soon. First he needed to know more.

-Anyway, he doesn't usually get too involved with my patients, and that's what interests me, isn't it, Ibáñez?

-I guess so.

-This is Santos' bar, quiet to spend the afternoon. Valverde, Casas and the mechanic usually meet sometimes. They like to see the teachers pass by when they leave school.

Their laughter echoed in the empty street. Only a motorcycle passed by from time to time, a car or an ambulance. It was half past twelve at night, and they had walked almost ten more blocks. Then they began to feel something like thunder on the asphalt. Everyone noticed and looked around. There was only dew on the grooved tile sidewalks, thin streams of water in the gutters, weak lights from the porches of the houses that barely survived to the curb. They realized that the center of the streets rested in absolute darkness. The neighborhood where the hotel was located was not central, but a suburban neighborhood, and they were already in an even more remote neighborhood. The noise came from the end of the street where they had stopped, waiting to see a car appear, although they were sure that

was not it. They were like heavy footsteps, like those of a herd, and one of them must have thought, even if he did not dare to say it out loud, that they would soon see a herd of buffaloes.

How absurd was what Ibáñez said to himself at that moment, because he was the only one who dared to translate his premonition into silent words that he confessed only to himself. But the sound on the streets was not so loud now either, but seemed to suddenly come through the air, like a hollow sound, the sound of a wind instrument, perhaps a howl. Could that be it, perhaps?

Then Dergan said:

-It's the dogs, I can smell them. I know the smell of any dog, it is brought to us by the wind.

Ibáñez watched as the veterinarian sniffed the air like a hunter. He was going to say something but they immediately saw a white shadow appear from the next corner. They were standing at the intersection of two streets, each of the four monitoring one of the four possible threats. Because that's what it was about, threats that were confirmed in that strange white shadow that advanced through the thin mist of the night. They were no longer in doubt, they were dogs, and their barking became clear and strident, dry as horn sounds through the humid air of an unexplored forest. They came from the street that Ibáñez was guarding, and he shouted:

-Here they come!

They do not knew what to do. Should they run away, perhaps? Were they nothing more than stray dogs? The four looked around but saw nothing but that pack that was running towards them. They could see the mist of his breath in the night cold, and the barking was both menacing and hypnotic. The men stood still for a few more seconds, but Márquez was already pulling on the others' sleeves to flee.

-What's wrong with them, the fucking mother! Let's go from here!

-Wait a minute, if we run they will chase us! The only chance is to stay still! –Dergan said.

-Dear God, but they are going to bite us! –Walter insisted.

"Dergan knows animals, Walter," said Ruiz. "Let's hope he's right."

Then they stood still, threw their cigarettes on the floor, and stood shoulder to shoulder. The pack was now halfway down the block, moving quickly toward the intersection. The smell of dirty hair andfeces, urine and caked-on dirt did nothing more than delve his imagination into old forests and remote times, where ancient generations had waged long feuds and bloody hunts with wild dogs. They, the animals, were the intermediaries

between the hunters and the prey. They felt the dogs walking past them, rubbing against their pants, stepping on their shoes. Marquez said:

-They bit me!-But he wasn't sure, he had felt the tug on his pants but nothing more. Maybe they had smelled him and fled.

They saw perhaps forty dogs pass by. All the same from what they had seen. White, without ears and without tail. As Ruiz had said, they were built like bulldogs but not exactly the same. When everyone passed, the four men sighed in relief.

"If we had run, we would have been running for blocks, and they would surely catch up with us," said Dergan.

"Let me see that ankle," Ruiz said to Walter.

The architect sat on the curb and rolled up his pants. He had nothing.

-He must have sniffed you a little, just.

Ibáñez looked around at the houses.

-But no one came out to see what was happening? I don't understand.

-They are used to it, Mateo. I know the people in this neighborhood, they are my patients. They've been asking me about the dogs for a long time, and they no longer wake up when they hear them pass by.

-What kind are they, do they look like half-breeds?

"Yes," said Dergan. "But they have deformities, like mutilations from birth." They are all the same, did you notice?

-But where did they go now?

-There, where we came from.

"My God," Ibáñez said. "The hotel." He started to walk there, but Ruiz stopped him.

-It's closed, Mateo, Walter has the key, they don't usually enter the houses either.

-My family is there, I want to be sure.

-Then let's all go.

The four of them started running towards the hotel. They were men not used to sports and three blocks later they were already tired. They slowed down but were still sweating and breathing hard.

"Damn cigarette," said Ruiz, who put his hand on his chest and coughed up opaque phlegm.

-There's no way we're going to reach them if there was a phone nearby.

-There is not even an open bowling alley...there is a public telephone there.

Dergan ran and told them to continue. Soon he caught up with them:

-It is without line, its cables are eaten away.

They looked at him without stopping at his rapid pace, as if asking him if it was possible that the dogs had done it.

-They destroy everything, garbage cans, cables, tires, plants. They even killed a homeless man in the square two months ago.

Ibáñez looked at Ruiz and asked:

-I never knew about that.

-It didn't appear in the newspapers, at least. The ministry did not want it to be known.

Mateo Ibáñez ran again. The others tried to keep up with him. Márquez was a good distance away from them, tired, with his tie loose, his jacket hanging from his arm and his shirt sweaty. They had gone too far from the hotel and were still at least five blocks away.

5

Alma had undressed and put on her nightgown ten minutes after Mateo came down to the dining room. He heard the voices of the men below, moving the chairs. Then the street door that let in the noise of the engine of a waste collection truck. They'll go for a walk, she thought. She kissed Blas, who snuggled into her crib, without waking up. Then she went to bed. She didn't like hotels, the cold and strange sheets gave her chills even in the middle of summer. The dark room was even more intriguing, with that humidity permeating the furniture and old curtains. The metal shutters were rusted and creaked in the wind. There was a draft coming from somewhere, and she got up to adjust the sashes of the window. Before closing, she looked down the street and saw a boy running, a teenager, who was holding his hand and seemed to be shouting, although very quietly. She then heard the knocking on the street door, and she recognized the hotel bellman in that boy dressed like any other in jeans and a T-shirt.

She closed the window again and put on a robe. She took a quick look at Blas, who was still asleep. She stepped out into the hallway and looked

toward the door. She saw the boy's shadow hitting her. From the room behind the counter came the janitor with a flashlight, with disheveled hair and a green and red plaid robe.

-Who is it?! What's happening?!

-It's me, man! - the boy shouted.

Ansaldi went to open it, but turned around, walked back to the counter and looked for the key. She didn't find it. She then searched the drawers and found a copy. Meanwhile, Alma went down the stairs.

-What happened?

-He is my nephew, I don't know what happened to him. I'm sorry he woke you up.

-It doesn't matter, open it.

-I hope this key works, it is an old copy, I gave the other one to the doctors sofor them to enter when they return from their walk

He put the key in the lock and it was difficult to open, but finally he did and the boy went straight in to sit on the armchair in the hall. His face was wrinkled in pain and he was holding his right hand with his left.

-A dog bite me!

-But where!

-Two blocks from here,

-And what were you doing on the street at this hour when I sent you to bed?

-Mr. Ansaldi, please, leave that for later, don't you see that he is bleeding. Where do you have a first aid kit?

-Give thanks to the lady that you are saved for now. I'm going for the first aid kit, my dear lady.

The janitor went into his room, whose light barely illuminated the hall. Alma tried to calm the boy and see the wound, but he could barely. He looked for the switch and it didn't work. He found the main cash register is behind the counter. Alma tried it and all the lights on the ground floor came on. Why Ansaldi had cut off all the lights in that sector at night. Would he have reached that breaking point in needing to save him? He went back to where the boy was and checked the wound, it was wide and had an exposed thumb bone.

-Mr. Ansaldi, quickly, we have to take him to the hospital!

The janitor said that he couldn't find the first aid kit, and when he left the room he was surprised to see all the lights on.

-Who lit them?

-It was me, and it is absurd to cut the power at night, especially in a hotel.

-My dear lady, there are reasons for that, and you do not know them, if I may say so.

-I don't know any reason other than his stinginess. But now we have to take the boy to the hospital. At least call an ambulance.

Ansaldi went to make the phone call, offended but with dignified gestures.

-What a stupid man your uncle is! Excuse me, but that's just how he behaves. Why do you cut the lights?

The boy looked at her for a moment, as if deciding whether to answer or not, finally he said:

-Because dogs, if there are lights they don't come near.

-And why would I want them to come to the hotel?

-They throw them out from everywhere, lady. However, here they sometimes sleep on the threshold until before dawn. My uncle feeds them if he sees them very hungry.

It's crazy, Alma told herself, everyone in this place is crazy.

Ansaldi returned saying that there were no ambulances available at the hospital, that they had to take him themselves.

-My God, and who knows when my husband will return. I'm going to change and take out our car. Please wrap a clean cloth around that wound, will you?

When Alma returned to her room, Blas was still asleep. He thanked heaven and hoped she didn't wake up. But if he went out he had to leave him alone with that old man, and not even think about it. He had no choice but to take her to the hospital with him. The old man sure wouldn't want to leave the hotel alone. And Mateo who does not arrive, out for a walk with friends after so long of an austere life in Buenos Aires, and precisely today.

She finished dressing and wrapped Blas in her coat. She went downstairs.

"I'm ready." She stopped and remembered that she had forgotten the papers and car keys. "Hold the child for me for a moment, please."

Ansaldi didn't know how to grab it. Alma made a gesture of boredom and placed him on the couch, next to the boy.

-Then please make sure it doesn't fall, at least that much-. She ran upstairs and looked for the papers in the suitcase, it was the only thing she had left unpacked because she didn't think she would need them so soon. She didn't find the keys, and she was scared to think that perhaps Mateo had taken them with him. She finally found them in her husband's travel jacket and she breathed a sigh of relief. She then heard barking coming closer. She went out into the hallway and went down the stairs, but halfway there she realized that the lights were off again.

-But what the fuck...? "She," she began to say, before seeing that almost ten dogs entered the dark hall, where a scant mercury light reached from the street. More than ten dogs were left outside, circling in front of the hotel. Those who had entered walked through the lobby, and she managed to see the shadow of the janitor and the boy sitting in the armchair. She thought of her son and became desperate. She ran there without seeing that two of the dogs were at the bottom of the stairs, or if she saw it she didn't really pay attention. Because she was sure of what she had seen just a second before. Mr. Ansaldi had begun to pick up the child and was bringing him closer to one of the dogs.

-No! She screamed as loud as she could, and her scream became even louder when she felt the deep, clean and exact bite of the fangs of one of the dogs that were waiting for her at the foot of the stairs.

Alma fell to the floor. She tried to get away, to shake the animal off her left ankle, but it held on tighter and tighter, while the other one grabbed her other leg. Soon she began to feel not pain, but a deep anesthesia, as if she no longer had legs. She then had to go crawling with the peShe walked between both animals to reach the armchair, where Ansaldi, contradicting what she had seen only a moment before, had curled up with his knees bent for protection. The boy began to defend himself with the pillows and throwing things from the table next to the couch.

Alma grabbed the armrest and begged the janitor for help. He looked at her as if he were seeing her for the first time. She realized that she could get nothing from him, and she thought she was bleeding to death because she could barely feel her legs. She looked for her son, but when she couldn't find him, she thought he must be hidden between the janitor and the bellboy. He no longer had anything to throw at them, so he started crying, without realizing that the blood that was coming out of his hand was staining the chair. The dogs were now more furious than before. They smelled blood, and Alma could feel it too, but her vision was blurring and she knew she was about to die.

Mateo, she murmured, and her imagination confused the face of her husband and the strange face of those animals. The dogs didn't seem to see

anything, their eyes were clear like those of the blind. That was the last thing she saw before she fell asleep, because that's what usually happens when blood gushes from a major artery. A body without blood is like a cauldron without water. The pressure cools and life is lost, slowly.

6

The four of them arrived at the hotel sidewalk, but from the previous block they saw the dogs in front of the door, circling and barking. Some neighbors had opened their windows and were looking out, none of them dared to come out.

When they realized that the animals were entering, Ibáñez made every effort he could to get there. Ruiz and Dergan did not match him, even Márquez, snorting like an ox, quickened the pace. But they had to stop before the dogs that blocked their way, growling and salivating intensely. Now they could see them up close. White and with very short hair, no ears, only one hole on each side of the skull, short and wide snout, robust body and short legs. But above all, they realized that the dogs were not looking directly at them, their eyelids were almost closed, as if drooping due to lack of use or facial paralysis. What could be seen of the eyes was only a dull glow of the orbits with clear pupils. The dogs moved their heads from side to side as if they were trembling, but that wasn't it, they were guided by their sense of smell and moved their muzzles everywhere, constantly. They were just like what a blind man does when he tries to distinguish where a particular sound comes from.

-They are blind, Ruiz –Dergan said.- You were right, they are the same.

Ibáñez did not understand what he meant, but that was not what mattered to him now.

-How are we going to get between them?

"I have an idea," said Márquez. He took the lighter out of his pocket and started lighting his bag on fire. Then he waved it in front of the dogs and they began to escape.

"Great, Walter," Dergan congratulated him, and the four of them made their way into the gap opened by the architect.

When the four of them entered, the last one closed the door, kicking the last dog that tried to follow them. Inside there were four others around the couch. Ibáñez saw his wife on the floor, with one of the animals clinging to her leg.

-Soul! –He shouted, going towards her.

-Careful! –Ruiz warned him when two of the dogs were going to attack him, but Bernardo picked up a chair and started hitting them.

Ibáñez got to where his wife was, the two dogs were still alive and clinging to her legs, so he grabbed another chair and started hitting them with all his strength, over and over again, with disgust and anger at the same time.

-Matthew, stop it! –He heard Bernardo say, that he grabbed him by the arms and stopped him. Then Mateo realized that the dog was destroyed, but he had not let go of Alma's leg. His strength was so great that he had broken the bone.

-My God, my Soul! My dear Soul! –He said, kneeling next to her and raising her head.

The janitor was still curled up on the couch, the boy looked at them still and not knowing what to do. Blas cried stained with blood. Mateo heard the crying and realized that his son was also hurt. But Ruiz had already picked him up and was checking him out.

There were only two other dogs alive, which Márquez was trying to scare away with his burning jacket. Dergan tried to hit them from behind, but they were too agile. The animals tried to look for an exit that they couldn't see, like flies on a window glass. Walter looked outside and saw that the others were gone. He opened the door and said:

-Push them out, Mauricio, let them go!

The dogs immediately escaped and Walter closed the door. The hallway was dark and he looked for the switch that didn't work. The boy got up from the couch and went to the counter. The lights turned on and they then saw the whole panorama of dirt and blood. e on the carpet and the armchairs. There were three dead dogs, Alma and Mateo, on the floor. Ansaldi continued to watch impassively from the armchair, always with his knees bent next to his chin. The boy's hand was destroyed and it was still bleeding.

-Mateo - said Ruiz. -Blas got stained with the boy's blood, but I don't see any wounds, don't worry.

Ibáñez showed no relief, who knows if he was listening.

-My soul! –He said, rocking his wife's head against his chest.

Ruiz decided to take matters into his own hands because he did not expect lucidity from his friend.

-Let me see it, please.

Mateo let him approach.

-She has a pulse, weak, but she is alive, Mateo, we have to take her to the hospital.

-And this boy too –Dergan said.

-I'm going to look for the car.-Márquez left through the parking lot door.

Ruiz tried to separate the dogs' jaws from Alma's legs.

-Help me, Mauricio.

Between the two of them they tried to open their mouths, while Ibáñez held their legs.

"The fucking mother..." said Bernardo, struggling with his jaws and trying at the same time not to destroy the woman's legs any further. Mauricio said he knew how to do it.

-Their jaw locks, like a dislocation, you understand? They cannot come off when they bite into something larger in diameter than their mouth.

Dergan ran to his room and brought the briefcase. He took out a pair of pliers and squeezed the dogs' jaws below the ears until they broke. Then they managed to release them easily.

The car was waiting at the door honking. Ibáñez lifted his wife in his arms, but before leaving he said to Dergan:

-Stay here to take care of my son, please, take care of him with your life.

Mauricio told him not to worry.

"Let's go," Ruiz urged.

They laid Alma in the back seat, with her head on Ibáñez's legs. He caressed her head, smoothing her dirty, sweaty hair. The boy sat in front between Márquez and Ruiz, now he was crying and Bernardo put an arm around his shoulders and tried to comfort him.

"It hurts," the boy said.

-What is your name? – Bernardo asked, as the street lights became more frequent as they approached the hospital.

-Manuel Ansaldi, sir.

-Is the janitor your relative?

-My uncle, sir. Actually, he's like my great uncle, I think. He is my grandfather's uncle.

Márquez and Ruiz looked at each other in amazement.

-But he is not more than fifty years old.

The boy did not answer. The white lights of the entrance to the guard were already visible.

7

Mauricio closed the door as he saw the car driving away. He lifted Blas into his arms.

-I'm going to wash the boy, old man. You get up and warm up some milk and food.

When he didn't move, he shook him by the arm to make him react.

-I know it was quite a shock, old man, but I don't see that you did anything to prevent it. Then he's going to tell me who opened the door if we had locked it. Come on, move your ass already!

He went up to the Ibáñez's room, took off the child's stained clothes and put him in the bathtub with warm water. Blas had not stopped crying all that time, but when he felt the warmth of the water he began to calm down. Dergan sang him a lullaby from his country, in French, and the soft, delicate rhythm of his words, the sweet mannerism of his voice made Blas smile as he soaped him.

Then he picked him up and dried him with the towel. He took him to bed and put on him the clothes that his mother a few hours before had placed in a closet drawer. She put him to bed, went out into the hallway and shouted:

-Old man, what about the milk?

When he didn't receive an answer, he ran downstairs and found him in the kitchen, standing next to the stove, waiting for it to boil.

-Is he deaf as well as stupid? I had to leave the boy alone. Bring her up as soon as he's ready.

He ran back into the room. Blas was no longer crying. A while later the janitor came up with the bottle and handed it to Dergan. Blas drank the milk from him and began to fall asleep. When he was sure he was sleeping completely, he tucked him between the sheets and adjusted them to the sides of the mattress. He checked that the window was closed properly. Then he left, locking the door. He went down to the dining room and found the old man sitting at one of the tables, having tea. He was still wearing the same robe and the same dirty dog smell.

-Why didn't you wash yourself a little? –Dergan said, more conciliatory. He did not understand the old man's participation in that disaster. If he hadn't opened the door...

-Tell me what happened.

Ansaldi looked at him with those brown eyes that looked like coffee au lait. Where does it come from, Dergan wondered. He doesn't look Argentinian, I get the impression that he comes from my lands, from the old continent I mean. It's as if he had ever seen him, or his family perhaps. He has those gloomy and lively eyes at the same time, sad and furious. They are eyes that hide too much, like the earthto.

-My nephew started knocking on the street door. He was hurt, so I looked for the copy of the key that he hasn't used in a long time. I was able to open it and let him in. Mrs. Ibáñez had woken up and she accompanied me. She said he had to take him to the hospital and that he was going to use his car. He went to change and get his keys, I guess. But when she came down the dogs had already entered.

-But then you didn't close the door when you let the kid in?

Ansaldi shrugged his shoulders and replied:

-It didn't occur to me at the time, Manuel was complaining of pain and we didn't know what to do.

Dergan rubbed his face with his hands, tired and furious at seeing such stupidity.

-But why were they in the dark, with the main switch off. With big lights the animals usually don't get close.

-I turn them off at night on the ground floor, doctor, to save money, you know that the hotel is not doing well lately.

-Stop being a doctor, I'm a veterinarian.

-As you wish, Monsieur Dergan.

Mauricio then perceived in that Italian accent a residue of old times. He no longer doubted, the old man had come from Italy a long time before, and he knew his land of Brittany.

-When did you come from Europe?

Ansaldi smiled.

-Oh, monsieur, it's been so long that I can't remember.

-But how old is he?

The old man did not answer, he was a very bad actor and it was obvious that he was playing deaf at convenience.

-I can not hear myself?

-What, monsieur?

-I asked him how old he is.

Ansaldi stood up and Dergan held him back.

-I'm tired, monsieur, please have mercy on an old man like me. Tomorrow I have to have this hotel ready for you.

-What city do you come from, at least answer that?

-From Firenze, monsieur.

Then he got up, went to his room and closed the door, but first he turned off the lights again, without making the slightest movement to clean the hall or remove the dogs' bodies. Mauricio gave a start when he was left in the dark, and suddenly remembered that before coming from France his grandfather told him stories, legends of old medieval Europe, some cheerful handed down by troubadours, but others, from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, more sinister. . He had once told him a story about a certain Alice of Trieste, of great beauty, who had died of syphilis, but he told himself that in reality she had been killed by her husband with a mechanical device that she had invented. It was a fantasy story involving an automaton and an immoderate imagination. She didn't know why she thought of such a story at that moment, perhaps it was because she was the only one of Italian origin that her French grandfather had told her, or perhaps because the surname Ansaldi sounded reminiscent of that woman's name and that city in particular. But that Alice had died without children, as he believed.

He went to look for a burlap bag in the trunk of his car. He returned to her, picked up her corpses and put them inside her. He would let Ansaldi's employees clean up the rest. He carried the bag to his room and left it there, locking it, although he did not think it was inviolable. He returned to the boy's room, who was still sleeping, and lay down on the bed in which the Ibanezes would never sleep together again.

8

On Sunday morning, Ibáñez woke up sitting in a hospital chair, with his head in his arms and his body lying on the mattress where his wife was. He looked up, startled as he felt her touch him. Alma's hand caressed his.

-How do you feel? –She asked him, kissing his forehead.

-Evil.

Mateo could only kiss her lips, face and neck. Not so much to console her, but to make sure that he had not lost her, that it was her, her wife, her soul, who was in that bed.

-And Blas? –she asked.

-It's okay, luckily nothing happened to him. He is at the hotel with Dergan.

-And the old man...?

-They didn't bite him either...but the boy almost lost a finger on his hand. What are you going to do...

-My God...

-Please, my love, don't worry, everything has already happened.

-But you and the others have to study them, those beasts...

-We will find a solution. Please don't get agitated, don't worry about us. Dedicate yourself to healing yourself.

-My legs hurt...

Mateo looked at the foot of the bed. How was he going to tell her, for God's sake, how was he going to tell his wife that he would probably lose half his leg, or maybe both. They had operated on her last night, Ruiz was even in the operating room, but they prohibited him from entering. And now she had her legs with two semicircles of external braces and with bandages covering the complete lack of muscles and tendons.

Alma raised her head a little and noticed her bulge under her sheets.

-Devices?

-External tutors, you have exposed fractures, but they already cleaned you last night and you are on antibiotics. Now try to sleep.

Alma closed her eyes, not because he obeyed him but because he was tired. In the serum that fed his blood there were sedatives, painkillers and antibiotics. Quite a cocktail that not many would resist for a long time. But she is strong, she told herself. They had given her the vaccines as soon as she arrived at the hospital. Alma opened her eyes again and said:

-The old...

-I already told you that nothing happened to him...

-No, Mateo...the old man wanted to kill Blas...

-What are you saying, I don't understand?

Alma took a deep breath to raise her voice but was shaken by a coughing fit. Mateo handed her a glass of water and helped her drink. She couldn't speak better.

-He wanted to...between...between...give it...

Then she closed her eyes and her head fell back onto the pillow.

-Soul... Soul.

Mateo took his pulse and couldn't find it.

-Nurse!

He put his ear to Alma's chest and heard no heartbeat. He began to do the resuscitation maneuver while the nurse watched him from the door. Shortly after, the doctors came in with the electroshock device and separated him from the bed. Mateo stayed in a corner, watching, trying to glimpse his wife among the bodies of the doctors and nurses. He turned against the wall, hugging himself, scraping his forehead on the wall. Oh my God, don't let it go, don't let it go, don't let it go...

-Doctor...

Mateo turned around. It was the doctor who had operated on her.

-Doctor, I'm very sorry, a clot must have caused the arrest. We did everything necessary.

Mateo rested his right hand on the doctor's shoulder. He nodded but did not dare approach Alma. He was shaking, and the doctor helped him walk to the bed. She was someone else, not his wife, not the woman he had married. He had seen dead people all his life, so he knew that they are fragments of anatomy, bodies whose names no longer belong to them. They acquire a new state without particularisms or eccentricities. A noun like an adjective is no longer useful to them, only a noun: corpse. A word that summarizes a permanent state, a situation that does not imply circumstances or conditions. Isolated and protected from the ups and downs and threats of life, forever ignorant like foolish children of love and sorrow. They are things that we watch decompose over time, that we put in drawers and bury or hide in vaulted apartments in cities that grow up and down. Cemeteries where the dead don't even know that next to them there is another dead person as lonely as him. Where silence is both anguish and a relief, a desperate search and an emptiness without vertigo. Where darkness is not fear but abandonment, unfathomable space and narrow limits without movement. Where everything is at the same time nothing, where opposites cancel each other, light and shadow, noise and silence.

There it is possible to coexist due to the wise disposition of God who has decided to erase the contrasts to allow the rest of humans filled with anguish and terror. Eyes that have seen the disaster of life need to see the peace of darkness.

Mateo cried over Alma's face, over what was the face of that woman with whom he had a son who survived in a hotel, cared for by the inexperienced hands of a veterinarian and next to an old man who was more dangerous to him than the others. same dogs. He sheltered Alma's head in her hands, ruffling the hair in which he had buried her face so many times while they were making love, smelling again the intense aroma of that woman who was now getting lost in the smell. to medicines and alcohol. Her tears had a smell too, his tears, because she had not managed to cry before she died. Mateo Ibáñez's tears wet the face of an already nameless corpse. A remnant of bones and flesh that would no longer care about a man's desperate gestures or the tears he might shed. A body that had once responded to his touch and his words after a long time of thinking that no one in the world would ever do it for him. And now he was insensitive to both her love and her despair, to her plea and to her intimate offer to surrender himself to that state only guessed at, only laughably sensed by those who have not passed that limit, so fine and thin, so transparent. , but which has the imperishable, the inviolable, the inscrutable virtue of maximum secrecy. Nothingness and darkness.

They took him to an adjoining room and gave him a painkiller. A nurse stayed to take care of him. Ruiz came in next and stood next to the bed. Mateo was staring at the ceiling of the room, then he shook Ruiz's hand and sat down.

-What I am going to do? –He murmured.

Bernardo did not hear him and leaned over to hear him better. Mateo whispered the same question in her ear, and then clung to his friend. He hugged him with all his strength and Ruiz let him do it, not pressing him against him but caressing his back, head and shoulders. Because that manI needed the comfort of a caress and not the strength of a hug alone. The strength was in Mateo Ibáñez's anger, it was in the pain he caused in the fragile body of Bernardo Ruiz, who despite everything did not complain, because at the end of the day he was also a man and felt capable of understanding and endure, of being the target of the anger his friend needed to vent and share. The pain like a hug and his corresponding response, the caresses on the back and head. A hand that shakes the hair like our father did when we were kids, a hand that pats the back like our grandfather did when we tried our first drink of alcohol. A pair of hands that would hold our heads to recognize the truth head-on before a pair of friendly eyes, and receive a kiss on the cheek. A kiss that also includes Judas' kiss because that was also love and friendship, because friendship includes love and love includes irremediable betrayal. One and the other separated by

abysses, linked by brittle bridges with faint-hearted words that died before their time. Words like corpses.

That's why Bernardo Ruiz let himself be hugged with some pain and all he had to do was rest his chin on the head of Mateo Ibáñez, who was crying, wetting his clothes that he hadn't changed since last night.

-Cry all you want. Do you know that despite knowing each other for a long time, we have only spent two days together? Friendship is curious, Mateo, isn't it?

She wasn't expecting a response, it was just conversation, time wasted inside a hospital room while outside, behind the frosted glass windows, they both knew that the morning also continued to pass with conscious and deliberate desperation, in search of something that no one but her, maybe, he knew. Forgetting along the way the dead weight that would prevent your faster pace, things and men, everything whose substance requires time as a way of life and natural rhythm of permanence. Leaving aside what is no use, kicking the obstacles in the way and moving forward without wanting to look back, even though sometimes I do. But she, the bright morning, doesn't like to do it, to look back. Because when that happens, in the afternoons she usually regrets her pace, her head usually hurts from the sun and her back hurts from the sun. Then she only has to bow her head while her legs follow, her beautiful legs supported by two enormous feet shod in full moons. Always sliding, regretful every night and stimulated every morning. But tied to a purpose that she, perhaps, does not even know.

9

When she opened her eyes, Mauricio had little Blas on her chest. Who knows how long the boy had crawled from his spot and curled up against and over him for warmth. He glanced at the alarm clock on the nightstand. It was almost nine in the morning on Sunday. He yawned, scrubbing his face with his hands. He had slept dressed and his clothes were wrinkled. He found himself, suddenly, with Blas's open eyes.

-Good morning – he told her.

"Hello," Blas answered.

-What a well-mannered boy, you slept like a dormouse all night and now you greet me like a gentleman! Let's go pee...

She picked him up and carried him to the bathroom. He sat him on a romper that Alma had brought. Mauricio urinated in the toilet. The boy,

sitting from his place, looked in amazement at the strong flow of that man who was not his father, but who nevertheless treated him well and with whom they seemed to feel comfortable.

-Have you already done it? –Mauricio asked, flushing the toilet. He picked up Blas and saw the little puddle of urine in the suit. - Good boy. Now let's have breakfast.

They went down to the dining room. A man was cleaning up the dirt in the lobby.

-Good morning –Dergan said.- And the janitor?

-He got up early to visit his nephew in the hospital, sir.

Mauricio sat Blas in the high chair. The cook came to take their order.

-Warm milk with sugar for the boy, water, orange juice and vanilla. “You know, what a baby takes,” he said, smiling, as if apologizing for his ignorance in those things.

The woman understood.

-And for you?

-Coffee with milk, nothing more. But first I want to change my clothes, so take care of him while he has breakfast, please.

-Okay, sir, I'll take it to the kitchen while I prepare breakfast.

Mauricio went back up and opened the door to his room. Then he just remembered, noticing his absence, the bag with the dogs. He looked everywhere in case he had forgotten to hide them somewhere in particular, but it was a narrow room. He slapped his forehead with the palm of one hand and called himself stupid. Last night he was tired with everything that had happened, and even though as he locked the door he had the fleeting thought that this wasn't the only copy, he hadn't felt like taking precautions. He couldn't take care of the boy and the dogs at the same time. time, not in the same room, at least. Someone must have entered during the night, and obviously it could only have been Ansaldi. Now the old man was gone, and although it was possibly true that he was in the hospital, he couldn't do anything until Ibáñez returned.

He decided to call by phone, at least he would talk to Márquez or Ruiz so as not to bother Mateo, since he already had enough with his wife. He went down, lifted the tube from the reception machine and dialed the hospital number. While he waited to be served, he watched the two employees work calmly, the man cleaning and the woman giving the boy breakfast. There was no point in getting angry with them, they were simple employees of the janitor.

-Good morning, could I contact Dr. Bernardo Ruiz, please?

-From...?

-From Mauricio Dergan, it is important, thank you.

He waited a moment. He looked at the clock on the wall, it was ten in the morning.

-Hello Mauricio?

-Yeah. Walter, is that you?

-Yes, did something happen with Blas?

-Nothing, he's having breakfast now. But I have important news. When are they coming back? How is Alma?

There was a brief but too eloquent silence for Dergan not to notice, to guess what Walter was going to tell him, and as a reflection of what he sensed, he looked at Blas in his little chair, with a wet vanilla in one hand, while the cook tried to put a spoonful of heavy cream in his mouth.

-It's a tragedy, Mauricio. Alma passed away fifteen minutes ago. Bernardo is with Mateo, trying to console him. I don't know when we are going to return to the hotel. If you want to go there...

-The fucking mother who gave birth to him, my God! What shit is this we've gotten ourselves into! Holy God, my Holy God of a thousand whores!

Mauricio Dergan did not know if he was thinking out loud or if it was simply the voice of his thoughts, stronger than usual. He told no one all this, but the employees looked at him. He rubbed his eyelids with his free hand, his fingers became moist, and he fell silent. On the other side of the phone there was a short period of absolute nothingness, where not even the hum of the line interrupted the due respect, as if even the gods who govern the knowledge of technology shared with men the same fear and the same servitude before that other stronger and more unpredictable goddess. It is not guided by hypotheses nor can it be summarized in treatises or subjected to tests, because experiments always end in failure or perhaps in triumph already foreseen by their very substance. Silence as proof and protective mantle, as a shroud and incense of respect, as an end in itself.

Márquez understood what was going through Mauricio's head.

-No need to come...

-If for now you manage alone...Mateo needs support, there are a lot of things to solve, you know. But tell me if something important happened at the hotel.

-Did you see Ansaldi in the hospital?

-Yes, he is in his nephew's room. He expects to be discharged at noon.

-Macanudo, then I have time.

-So that?

-I'll tell you later.

-Tell me now!

-The bodies of the dogs were stolen for the autopsy. And I'm sure he was the old one. But do not tell him anything. Just make sure he comes back here no before noon.

-Alright.

-Bye, and give my condolences to Mateo, if it helps...

-I will, take care.

He hung up the tube and looked at the street. There was the usual bustle of Sunday mornings. People going to or returning from the Casas bakery with bills, others with newspapers under their arms, or reading them distractedly as they walked, bumping into those neighbors who said good morning to them. You could already smell the smoke from some fire that someone was preparing for the Sunday barbecue in some patio of one of those anonymous and ordinary mansions. People who would soon die, because the years are nothing more than steps on a path. Tomorrow one of them would be gone, and few or no one would notice their absence. And the dogs would come out at night, they would do their job to hide before dawn, before anyone could or even dared to try to catch them. And the most curious thing is that the people had become accustomed, just as the majority had already become accustomed to the new state regime, to the soldiers on the roads and the military uniforms in the government. What did the political vicissitudes matter whose reports made headlines in the daily press, with more or less doses of deception, if someone he had known for less than a day had died. If someone who would never return had left another to be abandoned to his own fate, he could not take care of himself and he needed permanent care. A child of almost two years old for whom four men had to watch day and night, because he now represented more than the son of a dead woman, more than a boy to educate. He was already almost a symbol to whomHe had to be rescued from each next attack, just as his mother had saved him from the first.

-Sir, the boy has already finished his breakfast. Shall I serve you yours? Look, it's already late and I have to start preparing lunch.

"It's okay," he answered, sitting next to Blas.

"Mom, dad..." said the boy, playing with a spoon and hitting it on the tablecloth. The milk had spilled and an endearing smell shook Dergan's

memory. He thought of his childhood in his land, of the aroma of the milk that the milkman brought every morning in his jar dented by use. He came every dawn in his little white truck and his white apron, his gray cap and milk-stained boots. He would get out of the vehicle, fill the bottles that he had left at the door at each house since the night before, and return them by ringing the doorbell or knocking. He thought of the toast spread with butter that the same milkman provided on Mondays to those who ordered it every Friday.

Thank you, madame, said the man, after closing his hand over the coins that Maurice Dergan's mother gave him, while with the other he shook the boy's hair, saying goodbye until the next day, until that repeated eternity of the next day, and to the other, and to the other, until eternity itself proved to have an end because one day the milkman did not return. It is true that another man came, but another man is like another universe and another completely different eternity. And then not even this one, nor the truck, nor those mornings nor his mother returned. He wasn't even the boy he had seen in a mirror every day when he woke up.

He pressed Blas's head against his chest and kissed her head. He was so similar to Mateo that he was surprised to have noticed it only now. The round face, the hair as reddish as his father must have had when he was a child, the freckles on his cheeks, the pink lips. Blas was robust but not fat, with firm flesh and strong limbs for his age. However, he demonstrated a strange serenity, a peculiar look when he dedicated himself to observing the adults around him. Where, then, were Alma's signs? No external signs were seen, but they surely remained hidden, hidden until circumstances required it, when the appropriate time arrived to express themselves.

The cook brought him the coffee with milk.

-Anything else, doctor? Look, I'm closing.

Mauricio was not bothered by that insistence.

-Laugh. Merci, madame.

The woman looked at him without understanding, but she shook the dishcloth like someone swatting away a fly and went into the kitchen. Dergan, seeing her gesture, realized that he had spoken in her language without realizing it.

-Et bien, mon petit, tout revient.

Blas looked at him as if he understood, but it was the sound of that language that seemed to enchant him. His little face filled with a big smile and he stretched out his hand to touch Dergan's face, whose beard stained his face with a shade between black and gray. Mauricio put the cup on the plate and smiled at the baby.

My God, he thought. The mother is dead and we play. She'll have time to cry, I guess. He immediately thought of Ibáñez, of the loneliness and emptiness that he must be feeling, and he realized that he would never feel something like that. He knew himself, for a moment, emptier, more sterile than an amphora full of air. A clay pot that was poorly made and therefore never used, that time was covering with cracks, that sooner or later would not even serve as an ornament on a shelf. The path of useless things is so predictable that it is pathetically devastating to think about.

The man had gone out to clean the back garden. The woman was still in the kitchen. The street door was open, and what last night was a symbol of danger, today the bright sun and the placid serenity of Sunday morning collaborated to lull his reluctance and suspicions, especially that vague fear that surreptitiously takes hold as passes the last day before the working day. That restlessness that perhaps is born as a child when the idea of returning to school on Monday makes us think that Sunday is a beach on the edge of an abyss, a field cultivated with sunflowers, a field of wheat whose ears sway in the breeze below. the spring sun, in short, a refuge that we will lose just as little Blas lost his mother. And as he, who did not even suspect, soon, perhaps in the early hours of the afternoon, a shadow incarnated in the figure of his father would come to tell him, with timid distress, with the helpless helplessness that in turn carried all the burden. weight of the future that would be planted in the boy with such news, that his mother would no longer get up to make him breakfast, that she would neither dress him nor bathe him, that he would no longer hear that voice whose words he still did not understand but he did understand the tone, the softness or anger, and above all, that he would never again smell the perfume of that woman who was capable of summarizing the perfumeof all the women a man can meet throughout a lifetime.

She carried the boy with one arm and went to the reception. He closed the front door, returned to the counter, peeked around without any particular intention in case anyone saw him, looked around, and then tried to open the door to the concierge's room. It was locked. He searched through the counter drawers. Blas observed everything with curiosity, without a doubt it was all new to him, at least different from the usual habits of bed, food and games to which the life of an ordinary family had exposed him until then. Mauricio sang him a song in French, in a very low voice, and while he carefully rummaged through the little drawers and shelves for papers, the boy stroked his hair and laughed.

At the bottom of the bottom drawer he found a bunch of keys. He decided to try each one. The keys followed one after another but none of them opened. There were about twenty-five or thirty keys. The hotel was quiet, no one was trying to enter. Only a couple of people looked askance through the glass door. If no one came to say hello in a neighborhood where everyone knows each other after so many years, especially on a Sunday morning, was it because they didn't like the old man? Not even the

newsman had brought the Sunday newspaper. If they had booked the hotel for themselves, shouldn't they have also planned to bring them the newspaper? Or had Ansaldi suspended him?

As he asked himself these questions, one of the keys finally opened the door. Inadvertently, the key got lost again among the rest of the bunch when he entered and locked it. He would worry about it later, he told himself. He turned on the light in the room that had no windows, and was smaller than he had expected. It was an office and a bedroom at the same time. There was a desk against one wall, a bed against the opposite wall, and a closet. A chest of drawers served as support for file cabinets and folders. He didn't want to let go of Blas, so he had to search with one hand, discarding anything that was bureaucratic or exclusively hotel paperwork. He went to the closet and looked through the clothes. It was old and had a more unbearable musty smell than the rooms above. He rummaged through the white clothing, old cotton underwear, long-sleeved T-shirts and long underwear, wool stockings and girdles. There were old photos, stained and mostly sepia, where Ansaldi appeared almost the same as he does now, just a little younger. Dergan recognized places on the old continent. In one, Ansaldi was in Firenze, the replica of Michelangelo's David could be seen in the background. It must have been from the post-war years, but then he wondered if it was really the replica, as he knew it must have been at that time, or the original. In all the photos Ansaldi appeared in the foreground and never in full body, and there were no men or women, or other things that would reveal the year in which the photograph had been taken.

Blas entertained himself with that photo while he continued searching. He found some old, hardcover documents. He opened one of them, the leaves, so brittle, broke when he tried to fold them. Some were already broken, and he tried to rebuild them by sitting on the bed. There were no photos there, but he tried to read the Italian in those neat letters that had belonged to some dedicated civil registry employee. They were smudged and distorted by age and humidity. But he managed to read the name: Gregorio Ansaldi. His birthplace confirmed what he already knew. He read the date of birth: 11 Giulio di 1870.

It was impossible, he told himself, that the man he knew was ninety-four years old.

He continued reading:... figlio di don Gregorio Ansaldi e donna Marietta Sottocorno. He knew the woman's last name, he didn't remember when or where she had heard it, but she seemed familiar to him. He started thinking about that while he put away the papers where he had found them. I know that last name, he told himself, searching again for the right key, taking a good few minutes to find it. But the search for the origin of such a name was not so quick. He noticed, almost without much attention, if anyone saw him leaving the room, then he went out into the street and started walking, absorbed in his idea, suddenly obsessed with finding a memory lost in a huge gap in his memory that It was surprising to find it just when I least

expected it. Those lagoons are more like lakes, or sometimes oceans that we are forced to cross, helpless, with cramped legs and almost drowned, in search of a piece of information that from one moment to the next becomes essential to us like the very fact of breathing. Ashamed and wounded in our pride, we look for the precise information that will save us not only from the situation that required that information, but from the humiliation of forgetfulness. Forgetfulness is sometimes excusable, other times laughable, but never so degrading asThat fragment of memory that has detached itself from us like a child that in one moment we held in our hand and the other, now free, approaches the shore of a rough sea, the edge of a cliff or the abysmal limits beyond. of the curb of a sidewalk.

He suddenly remembered that he was still carrying Blas in his left arm. He was so engrossed in the documents he had just seen, so absorbed in discovering where he knew that last name, that the child was less than a thing he carried with him out of mere automatism, especially that child as quiet and observant as Blas was. Was Mauricio behaving like a father, perhaps? He had seen in his friends who were already married and had families, that distracted attitude with which they took the children by the hand through the street, picked them up to cross from sidewalk to sidewalk, or got them in or out of the car to drop them off or pick them up from the street. school. Automations that are acquired to carry out tasks that, because they are so routine, take on the appearance of mere reflexes, where conscious thought no longer participates because the body excepts it, gives it a break, offers a vacation from worry. But sometimes, reflex acts are little traitors, some save our lives, others destroy it forever. And when conscious thought opens its eyes, it can find itself at the end of each day with tasks accomplished or with chaos and tragedy.

For this reason, Mauricio looked at Blas, and said:

-I hope you like the ride... - He seemed to be apologizing, excusing himself without fully doing so, compensating for a distraction with an act that had the dubious pretense of being planned.

He knew that something was leading him down that street, the need to remember was only a minor reason, although no less valid, for that wandering along the morning paths of a Sunday in La Plata. He felt led the same way that he led Blas, both silent and observing what they were seeing: the houses waking up from drowsiness, the cars coming out of the garages, the people illuminated by the Sunday sun as if they had just come out of a cave or a cave. a dark area where Saturday nights tend to get us, even if we resist, the irresistible anguish caused by that absence that we sense every Saturday night around twelve. Joy and debauchery only hide and accelerate the pace of a round that aims to surround and capture the center we are looking for without ever having seen it. And the night progresses, sadness settles at three in the morning like a gun in the mouth. The sadness from which only sleep knows how to save us. Sleep, perhaps, is the only godly god not invented by man. All the others are cruel like hungry

beasts, on the other hand, sleep, despite its teeth, is like a female who lifts her cubs by the skin of their backs and carries them slowly, parsimoniously towards a protected place where the world is harmless, or at least where oblivion prevails over the fierce custom of vigilance.

Dergan passed by the Casas bakery. He saw a young man at the door, in a white apron, dusting off his floury hands. A little girl, no more than three years old, was playing on the sidewalk, calling him daddy. She greeted the baker; Although she did not know him, the other responded with his hand. He continued to the next sidewalk, looking at the square where the owners had taken his dogs. The animals ran, sniffed each other, played with children, barked at the sparrows that perched on the ground to collect the crumbs that a couple of old women threw to them. Then he chased one of the animals with his eyes. It was not one of the wild dogs, but he realized that he had no owner. The animal circled around, trying to interfere in the others' game, but the domesticated dogs evaded it. The animal finally broke away and walked away from the square.

Mauricio went after him, trying to keep up with him. Although he thought it was going to be difficult, the animal stopped every few steps to smell something on the sidewalk, the thresholds where other dogs had urinated, the broken tiles where puddles had formed, the tree trunks on the sidewalks. He followed the dog for two blocks, until he reached a large house that took up almost half the block. Like a noise that wakes us up in the middle of the night, or perhaps it is more appropriate to compare it to a nightmare that shakes our body with a chill, he remembered what he is already beginning to resign himself to considering as another failure of his memory.

The big house he was seeing was the house that Walter had built, and where a woman lived with her daughter. The peculiar thing, the architect had told him, was that this woman called herself a fortune teller, and that was how she had earned her living since her husband was killed. Dergan, out of curiosity, because this strange profession was a source of sarcasm and apprehension for him at the same time, had asked him what their names were.

Las Cortéz, Márquez had answered, but aA little while later he said that his mother's maiden name was Sottocorno.

Mauricio knew that he had to enter that house. To ask what? If that was the woman's last name? Wasn't it ridiculous to ring the doorbell and ask that question to a complete stranger on a Sunday morning?

Yes it was, but the need to satisfy that curiosity that encompassed much more than that word is capable of defining was also imperative. But even words can be more than the ordinary meaning assigns them. Curiosity involves chance and luck, and with them one reaches the remote limits of the unknown. And such was the mansion for him: terrain that is explored

like someone entering a forest from which he knows, in advance, that he does not know the way out, if he has one.

He crossed the street and opened the wooden garden gate. A path of packed dirt with overgrown grass around it looked unkempt but not dirty. The walls of the house had damp stains, exposed to the south wind. At that moment the wind was blowing there in a different way than the rest of the neighborhood. As it was the only tall construction, perhaps the passage of the wind between the eaves and roofs, with its evocative sound of contained howl and even strangely distant even though it reached just a few meters, gave that impression of greater abruptness and desolation. At times, Mauricio believed he was in an African meadow, in full sun next to a rock that lacked shade, the next moment he believed he was under the cold darkness of a house whose walls creaked, hiding screams. Or were they barking? What he was sure of was that it was nothing more than sensations.

He knocked on the door. While he was waiting, he heard Blas say:

-Look at the wow wow...

Mauricio looked down and found a half-haired gray dog sniffing his shoes. Five meters above the hall, there were three or four other mongrel dogs, watching them. They didn't seem dangerous, they were just waiting, like him. Maybe they knew that when the door opened they would receive some food.

- What do you need?

Mauricio looked back at the door and barely saw a half-face of a woman between the frame and the half-closed door.

-Sorry for the inconvenience, Mrs. Cortéz. Dr. Ruiz told me about you, and I would like to ask you a question, if you would be so kind.

Appearing at that time on Sunday with the boy in her arms must have given María Cortéz confidence, because she immediately let him pass and offered him her fragile hand, with skin as light as her face. His black hair was tied back with a flimsy barrette, and some strands fell to his forehead. It looked like he had just woken up, but there were no signs of sleep on his face. She was dressed in a man's robe, perhaps her dead husband's, Dergan thought. He surprised himself thinking how beautiful she was. A simple but curiously individual beauty, fragile and intelligent at the same time, with a nose that was neither upturned nor too straight, green eyes that tended slightly to brown, a jaw that seemed to be the perfect complement to a pair of marked cheekbones but not excessively. For Dergan, too tall in fact, she did not reach his shoulders, but he did not find that uncomfortable as with other women.

-Sit down please. I don't usually do sessions at this time, but if the doctor ordered it...

Mauricio thought for a moment that he must tell the truth, but it was too far-fetched to be credible. He decided to invent something to justify her presence.

-I've been having some weird dreams, and well... here I am. I'm a veterinarian, Mrs. Cortéz, so you'll have to excuse some skepticism on my part.

She was now looking at him with greater interest. She had sat in an armchair with a high back and wide armrests. Only then did he notice the furniture. They were mostly fine, not expensive but of a certain age, as if they had been bought little by little but with a desire for elegance and solidity.

-Her son can play with my daughter in the meantime, don't you think? Lidia, please come!

A girl of no more than five years old appeared in the living room from the kitchen. She was even more beautiful than her mother.

"She's not my son," she hurried to clarify. "She belongs to a friend, I'm taking care of him because the mother is in the hospital."

-Well, it doesn't matter doctor.- He grabbed the girl by the hand and said:-Dear, take the little one to the toy room, please.

The girl nodded without saying anything and Dergan left Blas on the ground. Lidia grabbed his hand and patiently waited for the boy to pick up his wobbly, immature pace.

-He wants to drink something?

-No, thank you.- She looked at her wristwatch.- I would like to be back at the hotel before lunch.

-Then let's get started…

Dergan looked around, as if expecting a table and a crystal ball to appear. She perhaps perceived it, gave a slight smile and said that there they were bien. Any place was suitable, as long as it was inside the house.

-What are his dreams about?

He began to explain a scene that he believed he was inventing, but a part of himself knew that it was not entirely an invention, it was true that he had dreamed of similar scenes a few years ago, which then had not occurred again.

-I'm on a hunt, in Brittany, I was born there. My parents had a farm and with my uncles we went hunting on Sunday mornings. We had dogs that followed the trail and we went after them. But returning to the dream, there

I am the one the dogs are chasing. I can't see them, but I hear them barking.

He stopped and didn't know what to say anymore.

-That's all... maybe it's very stupid of me to ask something so obvious.

She settled down in the armchair, where she listened attentively with her back on the backrest, one elbow on the armrest and a finger on her in a horizontal position on her lips.

-What do you mean by “obvious”? –As he asked, he stood up a little.

-Well, you know, “the pursued pursuer”, anyone would say that I am afraid of something.

She laughed, not sarcastically but as she would have laughed at her own daughter's occurrence. He understood it that way, and it made him feel a little closer to that woman, whose man's robe only accentuated the extreme femininity not only of her body, but of a kind of security that seemed recent in her, as if there were born again a short time before, liberated, perhaps, from guilt or oppression. Did the death of her husband have anything to do with it?

-Doctor, nothing is so simple, especially not in dreams. The concepts that apparently serve to apply to the facts of life are almost always wrong, and in dreams they are totally and absolutely wrong.

-Excuse me, I thought I would come across what doctors call “Freud's hangovers.”

-I do not discredit that hypothesis, but my knowledge is not based on them. I must even confess that I don't know them, if we are going to be honest. I have not had the time or interest in studying them. What I know comes to me through direct signs... how could I explain it to him?

"You don't have to do it..." he said, getting up to touch her hand. He was moved by the effort of her white forehead to find the words that would make her understand what she herself did not seem to fully understand. He noticed her as soon as he touched her, but she withdrew his hand from her as if he had struck her, and he saw her turn her head and pay attention to a sound or something that he had not been able to hear.

-What's happening? I didn't mean to offend her.

She looked at him and covered his mouth with her hand. I continued paying attention to something that was happening outside the house, because her gaze was now on the window.

"Shots fired..." she said.

María Cortéz heard gunshots in the street. Only she could hear them, and such shots appeared when Mauricio Dergan touched her. She now knew the cause of the dreams, and she had an answer for that veterinarian who came to consult her on a Sunday, with a strange boy and with reasons as suspicious as they were trivial.

Whatever she had come for, she would have to offer him something much greater, no matter how much he didn't want to accept it or laugh it off. She had learned that those were the two most common attitudes when she told others how they were going to die. But hiding it from them was worse than mentioning it, because then it would orbit around María Cortéz's life like something half-generated, like the abortion of a monster that nevertheless continued to live. Instead, after saying it, the turbulent fluids of fear changed hands and she was left with that calmer thing in her hands, like a baby that has died but remains beautiful, and above all serene. The truth has that merit, that syllogism that excuses it before everything, before the gods and even before death.

Mauricio was standing in front of her, her hands on her armrest, forming a cage around that beautiful witch whose adoration had begun as soon as she entered the house and who was no longer resisting. He brought his lips closer and kissed her.

She allowed it, without kissing him back, at least at first. He knew what women who have been without a man for a long time smell like. There is a smell that could be defined in a thousand ways, some obscene and others with pejorative names and also others with elegant sound. What he knew, however, he felt in her body as he feels before a woman who, although dressed, seems naked to the eyes of a man. It is her lips that hide a certain perfume, her eyes as beautiful as they are shocking songs of simultaneous cruelty and pity, of request and rejection, of rejection and imploring desperation.

And just an instant before her lips rested on his again, now of her own free will and without a hint of fear, she said:

-He will die murdered in the street, as dogs.

She must have heard it, without a doubt, but those words meant, perhaps for him, something less than a speck of dust compared to what she was feeling when he kissed her. Absolute forgetfulness is probably the most excellent virtue when the body penetrates that simulacrum of love that everyone calls with the plural pronoun of kisses, caresses and sex. It is not what love is defined by, nor that morbidity of promiscuous representatives of boredom turned into obsession. It is something that can only arise between peers, that is, people who do not necessarily have to complement each other, among whom silence is more effective than words, and touch is not only an easily dismantled barrier, but an emblem, a flag that both, like

soldiers penetrating the enemy camp with a war cry, they wear both as a sign of battle and of unconditional surrender.

An hour later, Mauricio Dergan ran out of María Cortéz's room. His shirt barely buttoned outside of his pants, hopping one foot at a time to put on his loafers. He had an expression too scared for a man who had been making love to a woman only five minutes before. He went down the stairs and entered the room where he had left Blas and the girl. He found them playing on the floor with some plastic bricks, building something that tried to look like the house they were in. He picked up the boy and carried him like a bundle under his arm, while he ran like a desperate man towards the street door, opened it and walked away, without stopping until he reached the sidewalk, cursing loudly, but with words in his native language, the fucking luck that had brought him to that big house.

He left Blas on the floor for a moment, adjusted his shirt inside his pants, rubbed his face as if he wanted to get rid of the aroma, the saliva and the smell of the kisses of the witch who told him how he was going to die. . Because it was only after penetrating her, perhaps right at that moment, that he felt that what she had told him just a short while before was the complete truth. Not because she said so, but for the reason that what he thought he had invented to get into the house was actually a memory, not just a nightmare.

Little Maurice used to go hunting with his father. The Martins uncles, his mother's brothers, accompanied them. The forest was fog with green patches and firewood hands brushing the olive jackets. He, like the others, wore thick black boots to protect himself from snakes, twill pants, and a jacket that matched his beret cap. He had been given a rifle for his birthday, and it was the second time he had used it. The dogs were barking twenty meters away, without being able to see them. His father led the way, with the rifle under his arm, his twin uncles were always together, so white that they were almost albino, silent as they usually were. Maurice thought about his mother's family, so large that during the Christmas holidays, despite almost fifty people gathered at the farm, more than twice as many remained scattered throughout the rest of the country. Brothers, cousins, brothers-in-law, grandmothers and great-grandfathers that he would not even remotely know. Maybe that distracted him, as if thinking about the family created ghosts while the real beings disappeared in the fog that invaded the forest that Sunday morning. They shouldn't have gone out, he told himself, finally realizing that he was lost.

-Pere! –He called. No one answered him except the dogs, and the barking came not from the front, but from behind.

As if his voice were not that of a human, or if that child's voice that was changing seemed to the dogs' ears like the cry of a wounded bird, the barking advanced towards where he was. And the bodies of the beasts followed the pace of the sound, and he could feel the sound of paws, twenty

paws of five dogs advancing rapidly towards him. Maurice ran, tripped over vines on the ground, overhanging roots, dropped his gun, collided with a log, and for a moment lost consciousness. He returned to reality and found himself standing, his forehead swollen and sore, but he continued to hear the dogs behind him, approaching. He ran again, without a certain direction, this time taking care of the trees, feeling stupid, ashamed of what his father would say when he found out, because he couldn't hide that bruise on his head. But would he return to the farm? Wouldn't the dogs reach him? They were his family, he had played with them, but when they ran after prey they tore everything to pieces, they were even capable of attacking their owners without getting between them and the prey.

It was cold that autumn morning, a Sunday that was not intended to be more than that, an end to the week, and like every end, a death. Hence, probably, that anguish, that Sunday anguish after every lunch. Only the morning is a jewel of crissuch that it is about to break around noon. Maurice smelled the aroma of poultry on his farm, browning, soaking up the oils and seasonings. Meat and noon. Another world that would emerge from the morning darkness in which he was immersed. And as if thinking about the mud had made the ideas a reality, he felt himself fall into a well. He now stood with his back against the background, surrounded by walls of earth and covered in dry leaves. He looked up, the fog was like a dense cover, but soon the dogs arrived, peering over the edge of the pit that was an animal trap. The dogs barked, their paws slipping off the muddy edge, letting pebbles fall on the boy. He barely saw them, only their teeth. He smelled the drool that fell in thin threads, heard the shrill sound of five dogs. He then heard the shots, undoubtedly from his father and his uncles, going in search of what they believed to be prey cornered by the dogs. When they arrive, he thought, they will realize it. They will lean over the edge of the trap and take aim, even if they are not sure what they are seeing in the dark. They will see two shining eyes, and that will be enough for them. The eyes of a victim shine the same, whether it is a man or a deer.

When Mauricio arrived at the door of the hotel, he realized that he had not asked the only question for which he had entered the house. Fear still ran through the streets hanging on his nerves, and he looked at Blas for the first time since he had left. The boy was crying. What would that girl have said to him, Mauricio thought.

Blas said:

-Mother…

She didn't say mommy or mommy, just this:

-Mom died, right?

10

It was after twelve and a sheet completely covered Alma's body. Mateo was sitting in a chair, with his arms clinging to the corpse, his face buried in that sheet that was already part of his wife's body, as if flesh and fabric had melted, the same as later, somewhere somewhere. cemetery, the flesh would fuse with the wood of the coffin.

But Ibáñez still did not know what was going to become of Alma's body. Ruiz had warned him that the hospital doctors, after making the complaint to the Ministry of Health, had received orders to take the body to the morgue to await the autopsy. He had received such news without getting upset, and Ruiz did not know if he was understanding what he was telling him. Yes, he had understood it, but his mind was too tired to think about two things at once. The pain predominated, it was a weight greater than the anger provoked by the mere idea of Alma's body being touched and opened. Doctors tend to have a divided spirit: they cause pain to cure if there is no other alternative, but they do not know how to bear it in themselves, and although they force their patients to follow the prescribed treatment, they are reluctant to adjust to it when it comes to them. Mateo Ibáñez would not have hesitated to do an autopsy in such a case, but he would fight against everyone to prevent them from opening Alma's body.

Alejandro Farías, then the province's health minister, entered the room where Ruiz and Ibáñez were on either side of the bed. He took a look at the body, then offered his condolences.

"Thank you," said Ibáñez.

Farías asked Ruiz with his eyes if he had transmitted his order. Ruiz nodded.

-Doctor Ibáñez, I deeply regret that his wife was one of the victims that we were trying to avoid by bringing you for the investigation.

He received no response. Mateo was still sitting looking at the white sheet.

-Doctor, please, you must understand the need for an autopsy. I know that I am asking for a more than human effort...

Ibáñez raised his head and said:

-Go to hell.

Farías approached Ruiz and spoke in his ear. Ibáñez caught that complicity, and was ashamed of his friend.

-Both of you go to hell, right now.

Farías left the room and Ruiz approached.

-Matthew...

-They already have the bodies of the dogs, why do they want to open Alma?

-Márquez spoke with Mauricio this morning, the dogs were stolen, Mateo, that's why we have nothing.

Ibáñez stood up suddenly and said:

-As? The most reputable mother who gave birth to them all, how did she let them be stolen from her? And my son?

Bernardo asked him to calm down, the boy was fine.

"My God..." Ibáñez repeated over and over again, going back and forth from one wall to another in the room. He kicked the chairs, rubbed his sweaty and exhausted face, knocked over the things on the nightstand. The things that Alma would never use again: his wallet with the lipstick, the hand mirror, the handkerchief, the perfume.

Ruiz let him do it, he couldn't find any other option than that. A security guard came in and Bernardo told him that everything was under control, to please leave them alone.

"Matthew," he tried to tell him.

Ibáñez whimpered like a boy. The handkerchief was wet and Ruiz offered him his. Mateo read the little oneñoo label with the name that almost all of Ruiz's clothes carried. It was a delicate detail that certain families of European descent still retained. Surely his wife's family had passed it on to him. She blew her nose and returned it with a slight smile.

Bernardo patted him on the back, and felt a lump in his throat when he felt that he regained the complicity of Mateo Ibáñez, that man who united him to the rest of the world in a way that no one else would guess. Away from his wife and his people, to whom he was inextricably linked, his contact with the world was often restricted to those brief but strong bonds, to the way in which men tend to look at each other without understanding. need to say anything.

In turn, Mateo Ibáñez envied Ruiz. Her friend had her wife, and he was expecting her child. She hated him to the point that she knew she might come to hate him very soon if such a feeling continued. But that little joke of returning the dirty handkerchief was a relief, as if a feather were capable of breaking, sometimes, the hard stone of meanness.

Half an hour later the three of them were in Márquez's car, he driving, Ibáñez next to him and Ruiz in the back seat. Mateo looked out the window,

lost in thoughts that the other two guessed what they were about but they were far from getting close to the truth. Back in the hospital morgue, he had abandoned his wife. That was what he had done, abandoning the leather that she had promised, indeed, that he had sworn not to give up for the rest of his life. But these promises do not take into account the decomposition of the flesh when they are made in the ecstasy of love, when the flesh is more alive than ever and not even it thinks about what it has always known, more conscious than our mind in not forgetting the futility and vulnerability of the substance of man. Promises made in line with love consciously evade the presence of the worms, he knows and pretends not to see them, and for a while the comedy works. But there comes a day, a sunny Sunday, when God is made present in the boastful triviality of Christian rites, when someone interrupts his step and stops to no longer move, that person made flesh and bones, which he always was, but molded by the form of the spirit, soul, substance or whatever you want to call it. It is no longer anything more than a piece of meat, not even a body, because even a body requires and needs the concept of a person, the memory of someone who has ever seen it move and speak.

No longer body, no longer Soul.

My soul, Mateo said in such a low voice that the others didn't even notice, especially now that Márquez had turned on the radio.

-Walter... – Ruiz recombined.

-Sorry…

"It doesn't matter, leave the radio, it distracts me that way..." Ibáñez said.

Then Márquez turned the dial until he found a newscast. After the well-known military march, another statement on the national network. Nothing new under the sun, the usual reports saying that only a few incidents have disturbed the handover to the new government. Some isolated demonstrations in Córdoba, others in Tucumán, several imprisoned, a few minor injuries. Dead? Maybe, or surely, but nothing was reported about that yet.

-Change…

Walter turned the dial again. Music.

"Leave that," said Ibáñez. He recognized another of Mussorgsky's Dances of Death. The same version again, the soprano's voice now singing the serenade that speaks of the prisoner whom death has freed.

He opened the window and took a deep breath of air that came in puffs against his face. He opened the buttons of his shirt and stuck his head out. Ruiz grabbed him by the shoulder, but he ignored him. He was crying,

maybe, or he was nauseous, maybe. Most likely it was both, because the song shook him. He, first a prisoner of bureaucracy, then of a regime that descended from the highest levels with the power of arms, then a prisoner of a job that had made him lose sensitivity and forget that the bodies of others are our own bodies. Finally, prisoner of an absence, and that was the only thing he could not remedy. A presence or a barrier can always be eliminated, but how can we get rid of an absence, how can we get rid of nothingness when it itself is the cause, the form and the reason for our imprisonment.

The music and the soprano's voice were confused with the whistle of the Sunday breeze blown up into a strange, cold wind due to the speed of the car and the sting of fear and anguish. The perspiration of the flesh is the best sign of life, more than a heartbeat or a movement, because these can be hangovers. But perspiration is the exact translation of a body breathing and suffering the warm scratch of blood.

That's why, despite the pain that the music made him relive, he felt better. LlPraying now was better and more sincere than a while ago, in front of his dead wife. Before the dead he cries, sometimes out of commitment, other times out of impression. But to cry far from them is to begin to realize that absence is not merely a word, but a world that is settling around us without asking our permission, a world that is not only changing but is settling in with all its brutality and arrogance. . Abusing their size and strength, using the weapons of fear, establishing new and arbitrary laws. Dwarfing the world we knew, dismantling it, turning it into fragments until it ceases to be a world - a body - and is called by all the names that the remains of the flesh deserve.

At the door of the hotel, they remembered Ansaldi. They had seen him a couple of times in the hospital hallways. Almost an hour before, Ruiz saw him leaving with his nephew. He had to be at the hotel already, so Márquez left the car parked next to the curb and Ruiz helped Ibáñez get out of the car, because Mateo had remained sitting after having parked, looking out the window at where there was nothing but the tiles of the sidewalks and the wall of the hotel.

The three found Dergan on the sidewalk with the boy in his arms. He looked agitated and sweaty.

-Where did you go with my son? -Matthew asked, suddenly waking up from his reverie. He took Blas out of her arms and hugged his son, kissing him several times desperately.

Dergan began to stammer his condolences for Alma, but Mateo didn't let him finish.

-Where did you take him?

-To take a walk, nothing more.- It made no sense to give explanations for what he himself did not know how to explain.

"Mom died..." they heard Blas say, suddenly.

Mateo heard those words from his son with great surprise as the fact they expressed was enormous. But since he had no words or answers consistent with the pain that this shame engenders in front of those we love, he dedicated himself to directing his fury towards Dergan.

-How dare you tell him? I'm the one who had to do it, damned son of a bitch.-Mateo faced Mauricio without letting go of Blas, pushing him with his chest.

Ruiz separated him, looking at Dergan angrily.

The vet was going to say something, he needed to defend himself, but what would he say: that a witch's daughter had told Blaise the truth? Then he remained silent and endured the insults.

-How the hell did you dare, idiot? And also you let them steal the dogs, you're a useless piece of shit.

Mateo walked through the lobby nervously hugging Blas. The boy had started crying when he saw his father like that. The screams scared him.

-I left them locked in my room. In the morning they were gone, but the door was still locked – Mauricio tried to explain.

Mateo didn't seem to want to listen to reasons.

-Then why didn't you stay taking care of them?

-Because I had to take care of your son, or you wanted him and the dogs to sleep in the same room.

Ibáñez did not respond. Dergan believed they were recovering points in their favor and confronted Ruiz.

-And why didn't you tell him that you already knew the dogs? You know they are the same.

Ruiz looked between them, bewildered at first.

-The same ones from when? –Ibáñez asked.

-Look, Mateo. Some time ago I saw some similar dogs in my wife's town. They seemed strange to me, but I didn't think it was important to mention it now.

-You knew they were so dangerous and you didn't say anything? Alma might be alive now if she hadn't left her alone.

"You were the one who brought them both, we came without family," said Ruiz.

Ibáñez looked at him not with resentment but like a condemned man. Dergan tried to change the subject.

-Ansaldi is the only one who has copies of the keys, he must have taken them. I don't know why, I haven't had the chance to talk to him yet, but I went into his room... - He fell silent when he saw the old man enter.

"My dear doctor," said Ansaldi, approaching Ibáñez. "I give you my sincere condolences for the irreparable loss of his lovely wife...

-Shut your mouth...What did you do with the dogs?

Ansaldo raised his eyebrows and placed a hand on his chest.

-As he says?

"Don't act stupid," said Mauricio. "You took the bodies out of my room, don't bother lying."

The nephew appeared from the kitchen with plates in his hands. The old man signaled for him to leave. The boy had a bandaged hand and was pale. Ruiz approached him and checked his eyes.

-Are you sure you were discharged?

-It's here, right? –The old man answered, forgetting his rhetoric.

-That doesn't tell me anything, they could have escaped from the hospital. This guy is not well, I'm going to call to confirm.

Ansaldi stopped him as he went towards the phone.

-Doctor, Manuel will recover on his own, and I need help at the hotel.

Ruiz broke away and took the phone. Dergan approached. -You hide a lot of things, old man. You're going to have to give explanations. Where did he take the bodies?

Ibáñez left Blas on the couch and signaled to Walter to take care of him. Then, he went to where the others were and he repeated Dergan's question. When he got no response, he grabbed the old man by his clothes and shook him. Nobody did anything to stop him, except his nephew. The boy said, just before passing out among a pile of broken plates:

-Valverde.

Ibáñez did not let go of the old man while Dergan and Ruiz went to help the boy, but he was already unconscious.

-Who is Valverde?

-The pharmacist, Mateo. Ruiz and I know him from our town.

-And why does he want dogs?

They both looked at each other. Ibáñez was tired of those knowing looks.

-You hide things from me and my family is dying, I'm fed up. I'm going to find out with that guy myself.

Ruiz told him:

-Mateo, please, wait for us to accompany you. Valverde is a strange guy. I already know him from my town...

-What do you want the dogs for? –Ibáñez insisted on asking the old man.

Ansaldi adjusted his clothes, as if he regained his lost dignity.

"After all, she is his father," he answered.

Walter stayed taking care of Blas. Dergan took the boy to the hospital again, in Márquez's car. Bernardo and Mateo left walking towards Gustavo Valverde's pharmacy.

It was three in the afternoon.

eleven

Ibáñez walked so fast that Ruiz could barely keep up with him. He decided to hold him by one arm to give himself a break.

-Stop a little, please. Think about what you are going to do.

Mateo looked at him angrily.

-What I should have done is killed that old man.

Mateo remembered those eyes when he heard him say that Valverde was the father of the dogs. When everyone separated, he had seen Ansaldi remain standing and immovable, as if that hotel were something more than his home, perhaps a place of permanence over not years, but centuries. It was absurd to think such a thing, but the old man had given him the impression of being as old as a rock.

-And what are you going to tell Valverde if he denies you having the dogs?

-Maybe he already dissected them or burned them, who knows. If what you told me is true, the guy is crazy.

-He is, but he is still intelligent. We went to primary school together, but he was already the best in school. He surpassed me in everything, even though his family didn't have the money to buy books.

-And when did he study pharmacy?

-I think never, but in the neighborhood that doesn't matter.

They arrived at the pharmacy, which was closed. It was right on a corner in front of the square. It had an old door with two narrow leaves, made of metal and glass. The central façade was high, with an arch modeled in plaster. On one side there was a vacant lot and on the other a private house. Ibáñez knocked on the door several times, and the noise echoed through the silent streets that Sunday afternoon. A couple of dogs started barking, but they were just harmless stray dogs, awakened from their nap on the threshold of a house.

-Valverde! –Matthew shouted.

Ruiz, who already knew the place, calmly pushed Ibáñez aside and rang the bell. Two minutes later the door opened. A young, medium-sized man with thick brown hair and green eyes asked:

-Doctor Ruiz, what is happening? Any urgency?

-Yes, but not the kind you think.

Ibáñez had already entered, brushing past Valverde, almost without paying him any attention. He had started searching with his eyes in the darkness of the pharmacy. The windows were closed.

-This is Dr. Ibáñez. He comes to study about wild dogs.

"Ah," said Valverde, running a hand through his hair and rubbing his eyes. He must have been taking a nap, perhaps, but his eyes looked more tired than sleepy. Most likely he was studying under his microscope, or probably dissecting, Ruiz thought.

Gustavo Valverde had left the door open and the sunlight allowed him to see his hands and his eyes with strange distinction. Ruiz followed the movement of her hands, which she wiped on her light blue apron, which was dirty. It was difficult to distinguish one aroma from the other in that pharmacy, the unmistakable smells were often confused there by the confinement. Was there a smell of formaldehyde, if he was not mistaken? He saw that Ibáñez also raised his head a little, as we all do, as dogs also do, when we sniff something. He realized that Mateo was going to speak, but he did not trust his friend in that state. He signaled to her and began to speak before him.

-Valverde, those dogs killed the doctor's wife. You will understand that it is a tragedy that my friend is not willing to ignore. He's angry, and I hope he understands our barging in.

Ibáñez wonderedThe bodies of the dogs we killed disappeared. Ansaldi acknowledged that you have them.

Valverde closed the door. Without answering, he walked almost in the darkness to a hallway where a very dim light came from one of the rooms.

"Come this way, doctors," he said, pointing down the hallway.

Mateo and Bernardo passed by him. There was a clearly discernible smell of formaldehyde, and it grew stronger as they moved forward. They only went a few meters, and at the last door, which was open, they saw a laboratory. Valverde followed them, but then he passed between them and the wall of the hallway and entered first.

-This is my workplace.

They were surprised to see that place so complete with medical instruments and equipment. There was a sink with formaldehyde, a dissection table, a sink with metal boxes full of tweezers, scissors, and scalpels. Reproductions of Vesalius' drawings and many other anatomical plates hung on the walls. On one wall there was a bookcase that reached to the ceiling. There were no windows, and it occurred to Ibáñez that perhaps the library was boarding them up. Only one large lamp hung from the ceiling, enough for the entire room. Several hooks served as racks for rubber aprons and overalls. There were tin cans from whose edges hung pieces of skin with fatty, dark, yellowish tissue. On the dissection table was one of the dogs. He was, perhaps, one of the animals that had killed Alma.

-As you see, Dr. Ruiz, Ansaldi told them the truth. He called me on the phone last night and he told me to go to the hotel. When I arrived, he made me wait in the lobby. I saw him go up, and after a while he returned dragging a bag. I opened it and saw the dogs.

-But what do you have to do with them? –Matthew asked.

-They are mine, doctor. Well, I created them, at least the first ones. Then they reproduced on their own.

-Do you mean that you caused this miscegenation?

-That's right, Dr. Ibáñez. Let me tell you the whole story, if you want. - He realized that Ibáñez was impatient, and added: - I can imagine what you must be going through, but for you to understand I have to take my time.

Ruiz thought it best to also say something to convince him:

-Mateo, today is Sunday, they are not going to touch Alma until tomorrow, and maybe what Valverde tells us can prevent it.

Ibáñez relented. Valverde fetched two stools and they sat around the dissection table. The lamp illuminated the dog's corpse with an artificial tone. The pharmacist had already skinned the animal and had gone so far as to dissect the muscle layers. Then he began to tell from the beginning, the story of the blind dogs.

12

When you are still a child, and your father dies in your arms, there is something that begins to engender at that moment. I had my father lying on my legs. My legs were tired after dredging for hours in the lagoon, my muscles were exhausted after swimming in search of the knife with which I had to open the bite wound to drain the poison. Scorpion venom.

It was on the shore where the scorpion stung my father in the hand. A few minutes before we had been talking, wondering where life came from. He had told me that it was water, but he forgot, or perhaps he did not know, that in the intermediate zone in which we found ourselves, similar to an intermediate state in the development of living beings, those who live there are nothing more than failed attempts, aborted experiments and creatures that are often difficult to kill. But above all its danger lies in deceit and hypocritical passivity. They are horrible vermin, but their small size in relation to man manages to confuse the stupid and the distracted.

That was us, despite my father having lived in this area his entire life. On the shore of that lagoon he had been watching generations of these beings being born and dying that he grabbed with his hands and threw aside so that they would not bother him. If he had to kill them, he did it, if he could avoid it, the better. Crabs, whose small pincers barely produced a pinch that made us laugh, turtles, which we turned around to see them kicking their bellies up with that exasperating slowness. And scorpions. They didn't show themselves too often, and as we moved away from them, they also tried to avoid us. But that evening my father had not decided, or he had forgotten, the time to finish our work. He had a twisted back, pain, and a sleepy, hungry expression. However, he continued dredging, while I helped him as best I could. Why did you let the sunset hour pass? The moon was already peeking over the poplars and was reflected in the waters that my father stirred, creating circles out of nothing, from the zero point of his own world, from the center of his hands as if they were a nucleus of power greater than that of God. . I don't why he was so kind to that guy. Who was but more than a fraud.

-Last nightI know if God has hands, or if he is incorporeal as they say, then how did he create the world? A power must be concentrated in something, it must have a continent that prevents its dispersion. My father's hands, for example.

From them I saw the circles of water born that grew and reproduced, until they became as big and slow as old men. The elders of the waters are like old men, they cover so many years that they escape from their hands. They include within their circumference so much animosity and so much multiple content that their forces are exhausted and they finally die being nothing, just calm waters, as equal as they were in that distant center of their origin. Before my father's hands dipped into them.

Sometimes God makes mistakes, he walks into a trap that man has prepared for him. And if God falls like a rat, unable to prove who he is, how could my father not also make a mistake and put his hands in that place where, as he told me very shortly after and before dying, there was a mound of mud that he thought was necessary? clean, because that's what the owners of the place paid him for. The more square meters she freed from obstacles, the more she would get for his family. That mound was the last of the night, and he went to discover it just a moment before leaving work.

"I was going to tell you to leave, and I just saw it and I shut up, the bitch..." he told me when the poison was already being distributed through his body like sap through the branches of a tree.

My old man was a huge and beautiful tree, rustic and strong, wide like the poplars that surrounded the lagoon and served as steps to the moon, tall like the cypresses that surrounded our room, swaying in the wind with an enviable and moving elasticity, strong like the oaks that grew on the sides of the road that led to the town, protecting us from the rain and the south wind. But more than all that, I will remember him for his aroma, not his countryman aroma, his perspiration and the smell of his dirty hair and muddy clothes, but that aroma he had every night after dinner, when he lit his old pipe. before bedtime. The smell of the eucalyptus trees in the forest where he took me for a walk on Sundays, collecting the seeds and fallen leaves, tearing off the peeling bark of the eucalyptus trees, feeling that smell so penetrating that it was like letting yourself be carried away, not towards the top, but towards ground level. Feeling dragged nose to nose on the humid earth covered with elongated green or brown leaves, forming a more comfortable mattress than the one in my own house.

I already said that I don't believe in God, but there were times when I felt not the idea but the presence of him. Those Sundays in the eucalyptus forest were one of them.

But if God disappears so quickly from people's lives, how could my father not do it, since he was barely a man. Later he would do the opposite

reasoning to me: if my father, being a man, could not hold the assembly of his body upright nor could he keep the judgment of his love for me in balance, so that I would not cry, so that I would not would break like an empty pitcher in the middle of a storm, how then, God himself, who lacks hands and a head, the judgment and the logic to survive on this earth that he created more as a coincidence than as a creation of love , he was not going to let the entire structure of his own existence, of all the unreason with which theologians believe that God needs to construct the immutable idiotic logic of his ramblings, fall into the mud of that night's black skies. The whims of a boy who kills without realizing it are more understandable, more human than the facts that are attributed to God.

If my father was dying in my arms, I told myself, then the world would sink that same night into the mud made of earth and flesh, water and tears, blood and poison, all mixed in a mortar in which some witch, perhaps, has worked day and night for a long time, molding the substance that would become my father and I, designing the architecture of that night, the engineering of the moon swinging as amazingly as it has since the beginning of time. Dreaming the network of sequences: my father at work, his small decisions, the mounds on which he set his sights, leaving his task now or later. And at the same time the sequences and actions of the scorpion, approaching, moving away, finally defending itself by attacking the hand of a man as innocent as the footprint of a fly on that same moon that was observing us.

Then my father's scream, the wrenching pain of him shaking me as if the scream were cold wind or an invisible clamp twisting my stomach. When I looked up, he was holding his injured hand with the other, pressing both against his body, as he sat down in the mud. He tried to contain his scream when he saw me, mitigating it was the only thing he managed to do.

-"Dad!" I said as I grabbed it, I had seen everything, except the scorpion sunk in the water.

Then it was my turn to scream. But a boy's scream is usually high-pitched and can be confused with the same fear of what he is seeing: his father, overcome with pain, and trying to speak, telling him to look for something. Yes, he wants me to look for the knife. And I, with the scorpion bite on one of my feet, went into the muddy waters. It was all nothing more than useless. I knew it from the beginning, but I couldn't tell him. While he was searching, he reproached me for not having the courage to leave that task and accompany him until he died. I knew I was scared, aware that he was pushing me away because I was afraid of seeing him die, and obedience was a good excuse to do so. He, I later thought, probably already knew in advance that he would not find the knife, and he had made me stay away to avoid the pain, at least immediate, of his death.

Whatever it was, I returned to his side, tired of the dirty water and mud. My father was still alive. I sat down and placed his head on my stretched

legs. I stroked him, embarrassed that my hands were shaking. For a moment, I saw him turn his gaze to my feet, then I hid them in the mud. The bite didn't hurt at all, I had almost forgotten about it, but I wondered when it would start to affect me. On my old man the effect had been immediate. Maybe, when it stung me, there was little poison left, or maybe it was because a hand is closer to the heart than a foot. Prepared to wait all night, I witnessed the slow cessation of my father's breathing. He seemed to sink even though his body was still there. As if the air in his chest had kept him upright and standing while he was healthy, and like a balloon that was gradually deflating, his body now leaned with slight tremors and a sound very similar to a blow, which did not seem come from him but from a more distant place. I looked up at the sky and saw the moon, porous, reflecting in the waters of the lagoon, deforming, fragmenting just as it must have been happening with my father's soul.

When I looked at him again, he was no longer breathing, and his face was a weathered mask of pity and goodness, with a long, dirty beard, marked with the furrows that his tears had created like zigzagging paths between the ravines of his early wrinkles. A face whose eyes, with lids open despite death, were silver balms like the water that came to die in small waves on the shore. The water that came to look for him, claiming, like a resentful goddess, the children that the barren and envious land had taken from him.

The morning came when my eyes had already become accustomed to the gloom of half-closed eyes, to that shadow that suddenly left without saying goodbye, that pious friendly shadow that wraps with the warm hands of consolation and meekness. I think I have seen the face of darkness, I think I have seen his teeth white as arctic ice. But his lips closed and only the cold remained, transformed into morning dew, creating a still small sun, emerging from the swamps beyond the known world. I had my dead father on my thighs, his eyelids still open, as if he were eager to see the rising sun. I closed them violently, scared of those eyes as clear and almost white as the teeth of a shadow. I saw my mother coming, in the distance, her voluminous body striving to reach an intermediate step between a brisk walk and a run. He could feel her heavy breathing, see her sweaty face, her worried expression and a grimace of early reproach on her lips. A whole economy of resources for the vast thoughts of possibilities that her mind must have been wielding at that moment.

That afternoon and the following night, they watched over my old man. We buried him the other day morning. Many came to see him off. Everyone was asking about my foot, and I heard them whispering unintelligible phrases. Dr. Ruiz, Sr., forced me to stay in bed for a few days, hoping to see me get sick. However, I didn't even have a fever. The inflammation of the wound subsided until only a purple sting remained, which also disappeared shortly after. The doctor told me, when he allowed me to get up, that I was lucky, but the old neighbors of the town began to say that I was some kind

of witch. According to them, I should have been dead, but I was playing and walking as if nothing had happened to me. I didn't miss attending my father's funeral, I had already honored him throughout that night at the lagoon. They didn't see me cry, because I didn't. When there is nothing inside you, nothingness arises from nothing, because I did not have the powerful hands of my father. In that I look like God. I am a hollow body with a dry covering of man.

And like a fortuitous god, a beggar god who walks his life through the streets of dreams, thinking about a non-existent past that he projectsIn the future, I grew up inventing nature poems. Scientific poems without conventional science. I knew something had happened to me: I was a survivor for some special cause. I didn't know her, but I was aware of the sharpness of my mind. I am the only child of parents no smarter than the mediocre average of people. I did not attribute my discovered ability to supernatural or mysterious factors, only to the venom of a scorpion. Chemistry is a god, without a doubt. A science that encompasses the alchemy of magicians and the rigorous, arbitrary laws of white-coated scientists. I have taken from each one the values that I considered best, and I set out to create in real life what my mind had already designed through the dizzying gorges of the imagination.

Let me explain it better, if I can. I don't consider myself a genius, neither now nor then. But at that time I was young, and my boastfulness, faced with the rejection of others, who considered me strange and lonely, was reinforced by his pride, as they typically say: in an ivory tower. My tower was adobe-walled and low to the ground, but I could see much more than the others. For example, that species are simply variations of the same origin, branches that have been dividing and diversifying, often amalgamating to give up on those transitory and failed unions. Nature also experiments and makes mistakes; Why not, then, I couldn't try it without risk or guilt. Monsters can be killed and buried, when I was wrong, I would do the same. No one but me would know about them, and I would only make them known when they were successful.

But what led me to all this, you might ask. On the one hand, the need. As some feel the imperious drive of sex, I needed to invent, create, actually, because I stopped using that euphemism a long time ago that tried to underestimate my talent. Just as some write and others paint to express something, to get rid of an idea that hurts like the rubbing of a stone on a sore, I had to do this.

However, the main reason, the one that I considered the most logical from every point of view, was the need to prolong life. Seeing my old man that night lying on the shore, feeling that his life was irremediably leaving him, I imagined, for the first time in my life, what would take me to these limits where I am now. Suspend death, at least that's it, I told myself. If I could stop death just as life can be stopped, I would be satisfied. So I read everything I could, I asked old Dr. Ruiz, the midwives he found in the town,

the veterinarians, all those who in one way or another had seen how life is born and dies. I even asked the gravediggers in the cemetery, who took me to see the men who put makeup on the dead, who shroud the corpses before closing the lids of the coffins and burying them. They know that there is an area where death is still undecided, where it has settled but does not know the neighborhood to which it has moved. It is a new death, she is unfamiliar with the streets and feels shy. Someone, with sufficient strength and the necessary intelligence, could catch her, deceive her when she appears at the door of her new house, and then expel her after having raped her on the bed of the recently dead man, in which she has established her figure of soft stone, his limbs made of broken sickles, his hands sweet like the acrid taste of a decomposed body.

I fixed up an old shack in the middle of the forest. I brought animals, I sacrificed some, I experimented with blood. I made mixtures, submerged the bodies in pools that were like breeding grounds for life. And after several months they grew, some strangely deformed but new, so much so that God himself envied me. When I took the first copy from that old hut, and took it to the town, they didn't understand me. They began to speak badly about me, and my mother even asked me to leave the town, because people were going to call the gendarmes. They came to look for me, and the creatures tried to protect me, but they killed all of them except one.

Rosa, who was my girlfriend at the time, went with me and we came to this city. We brought the creature with us. Rosa has been sick since then, the animal bit her hand. Maybe they will have to amputate her, and in the face of my failure to cure her, I have realized that all this time has been a sterile prologue. Prolific in creatures but useless in results. They have begun to appear on the streets of La Plata, but the authorities and people are dedicated to killing them, and every morning I watch the bodies piled up on the corners being carried away by mechanical shovels.

My wife will someday leave like she left my father. So I have set myself a task whose failure I know in advance: prolonging the life of human beings. that leave my side. My father, my wife. And what remains, like a bitter taste left in the mouth after a drunken night, is a music that accompanies the hangover of the years, until it becomes a monotonous merry-go-round organ, turning and turning, until the centripetal force is transformed. on the contrary, drawing the forces of the world to commit a single act, a single grand performance, a science fair spectacle in a town square. Those towns where the dogs are the only owners because they inhabit the streets with their barking, where you only know that there is still someone alive, because they, the dogs, announce with their distressed howl that there is still someone breathing.

-Come on, Dr. Ibáñez. Study these dogs yourself.

Valverde invited him to sit in front of the dissection table. Ibáñez, who had been listening to him like someone listening to a storyteller, almost to a troubadour not dedicated to romances but to fantastic stories, also stood up, surprised by his submission, amazed that the anger had crouched like a dog. with the tail between the legs. Now only curiosity and surprise prevailed.

"Look, doctor," Valverde said, separating the animal's skin with two tweezers. He had already been working all day, and almost all of the skin was off. The layer of adipose tissue was not white but yellow. Valverde took the scalpel and plunged it into the fat until he touched the aponeurosis. He put the scissors in and cut. Then, his muscle layers were freed. He offered the scissors to Ibáñez, saying:

-I know your reputation, doctor, you are a professional. It would be an honor for me if you would advise me.

Ibáñez put on gloves and made an incision in the dog's abdomen. He put down the instruments and used his hands. He felt, at first, a strange rigidity, as if the viscera had hardened.

Valverde noticed his expression.

-Calculations, Dr. Ibáñez. One of the problems of these dogs is kidney function. They do not live more than a year because they do not metabolize calcium. Look at the bones.

Ibáñez dissected the muscles of the hind legs, reached the bone and tested the consistency of the femur. He split in two easily.

-I'm not a veterinarian -Mateo said- but it seems that they suffer from something similar to osteogenesis imperfecta in humans.

-I think the same, doctor.

-We should call Dergan…-said Ruiz.

Ibáñez agreed.

-May I have the phone? –Ruiz asked Valverde.

Ruiz followed him to the pharmacy. He looked at the time on his wristwatch, it was eight at night. He hadn't realized how many hours they had been listening to Valverde's story. Mauricio had to be back at the hotel and called. He answered Ansaldi's voice.

"Dr. Dergan came back a while ago," the old man informed him.

-When he comes back, tell him to come to the pharmacy.

-He has already gone there, doctor.

Ansaldi's voice sounded much younger to him this time, not only because of the tone, but because of the way he spoke. There was a boast, a contempt evident in that voice. If he had not recognized him as soon as he picked up the phone, he would have assured that someone else had taken the phone instead of him. At that moment the bell rang. Valverde walked past him in the darkness and opened the front door. There were three people outside. Ruiz heard someone ask him for a remedy for a toothache, and Valverde returned, leaving the door open. He pulled a jar from a shelf behind the counter. He returned to the door and handed the bottle to the woman.

-Tomorrow he will pay me... - he said, and the woman left thanking him fervently.

Now it was a man who spoke:

-Give me something for the constipation, please.

Valverde went back to look for another green glass bottle with an indecipherable label.

-Take this, Don Casas, but go see the doctor tomorrow.

Ruiz could only laugh, and he saw how Valverde turned his head to the side with an expression not embarrassed, but condescending.

The third person was not a client but Mauricio Dergan.

-Come in, the doctors were waiting for you.

Ruiz went out to meet him.

-Ansaldi's nephew has a high fever, they take him to the operating room tonight to better clean the wound.

-We are dissecting one of the dogs, maybe we can get something out of all this.

Ruiz looked at Valverde reproachfully, but did not dare to say more. He knew that when Ibáñez came out of that state in which the pharmacist's story had put him, he would do much more than that, at least he expected it. Because he, Bernardo Ruiz, did not consider himself entitled to do so. Not only because his wife was still alive, and that, for many, was something that already excluded him from any understanding of what Ibáñez was going through, but there was something that related him to Valverde. Not blood ties, but a common factor related to animals. Gustavo Valverde paHe

seemed to understand them in an unusual way, and they had a tendency to protect him, to shelter between his legs, to allow themselves to be caressed by him and to growl at any stranger who tried to get in the way. And Ruiz was feeling something similar, a kind of pity, a certain sorrow, a special kind of love. When he looked at the pharmacist the many times he reproached him for changing his prescriptions or giving medicines to his patients without his consent, he ended up letting himself be convinced as he felt a tremor in his stomach. There were things that Ruiz believed he had forgotten, but those spasms in his belly reminded him that he had stopped being as he had once been, before meeting his wife, before going to the town of Le coer antique. From there he had come out a half-man, a man inhabited by a species of animal quality, a man that insects had turned into a habitat.

But none of this was literally going through Ruiz's head, he just sensed it as one senses something that we know is remotely distant, incorporated into one a long time before even if it had happened the day before. When old things, old myths and old legends enter a young body, they deliver their ancestral memory to the new cells. Then episodes, events occur, where that memory emerges not as something that we should consider foreign and strange, but as a tradition that we should not necessarily like, and which nevertheless must be strictly followed. And while his mind developed with fine acuity in the labyrinths of everyday reality, his insects marched like an army, preparing, training, reproducing in a fertile field that would bear fruit at some point in his life. He didn't know when, and he would never ask himself.

When he entered Valverde's pharmacy, he felt that his stomach took the shape of a fear that he could not classify, as if the aroma of the remedies and the smell of formaldehyde from the bottom of that environment awakened the beings that inhabited it, like this. how you wake up someone who has fainted with strong perfume or even alcohol. And with awakening comes memory, and almost always pain.

He noticed how Dergan looked at Valverde with distrust. They both preceded him into the hallway where Ibáñez was waiting for them. They found him still dedicated to dissecting. The kind of obsession that dominated Mateo when it came to medicine was amazing. He seemed to have forgotten the time, his dead wife, even his son. But here Ruiz was wrong. He saw him turn around and ask:

-How is Blas?

-Well, Walter takes care of him. Don't worry.-Dergan put a hand on his shoulder and gave him a smile.

Mateo didn't ask any more. He returned to dedicate himself to the dog. Valverde put his gloves back on.

-Come closer, Dr. Dergan, as a veterinarian, I'm sure this will interest you.

"Look, Mauricio," said Ibáñez, indicating the broken bone. "Deformities similar to rickets and degenerative osteoarthritis." –He looked up at Valverde, and asked: –What was the mistake?

The pharmacist shrugged.

-An enzymatic failure, surely, some defective gene. The dogs I used for crossbreeding were mixed breeds, but I injected blood from other species into the puppies I obtained at the beginning.

Mauricio now also explored the muscular planes that Ibáñez delicately lifted.

-Of which? –He asked.

-Of others... -Valverde said, but soon decided to say something else, because in any case his answer would be useless for them.- Of the others that I created in the town...

That inaccuracy didn't seem to bother anyone. Valverde knew how to convince them all with his clear eyes and his serene and calm voice. Ruiz thought he remembered the gossip on Sundays in his town, his father had even told him that the gendarmes had persecuted Valverde, until after a week they released him and he decided to come to La Plata.

"Monsters," said Ruiz.

Valverde looked at him with resentment, perhaps remembering that same word with which he had described his creatures many times. Ruiz didn't know why he had said it, and a bitter taste had remained in his mouth, except that it was like those rare occasions when bitterness is not a displeasure but a welcome change, almost a relief, even a brief salvation. .

-That's what they said, but they were creatures, each one of them. Like these dogs. When the first one was born, at least in the way they look now, he licked my hand that I had wet with milk. I was his mother and his father at the same time.

-Have you known Ansaldi for a long time?

The vet's question fell like a soft edge onto the table. No one realized the connection to what they were talking about until Valverde responded, as if in passing, without interrupting his attention on the dissection that Ibáñez was doing.

-It was already here when I arrived.

-Ah…-Dergan said, as if it weren't too much. been interested.

-The child - Valverde continued - was nine months old when the other one was born. The first was female, the second was male. I didn't plan it like that, it just happened by the laws of chance. I know, what I'm saying is a fatal contradiction, but you as doctors should agree with me. Perhaps Dr. Ibáñez, undoubtedly accustomed to the invariable architecture of anatomy, does not consider chance as a scientific factor. But you, Dr. Ruiz, know that there are as many diseases as there are patients. Even you, Ibáñez, cannot deny that anatomical variations confirm what I call the law of chance.

Mateo interrupted his work and rested his elbows on the table. Maybe he was thinking a response, but his eyes seemed blank.

-The prism of the human heart in baroque architecture –he recited.

Bernardo Ruiz said:

-Holy God…

-What's happening?

-That verse is from Cecilia…

-I don't know where I read it, I don't remember, but it came to me suddenly.- Then he returned to his task on the corpse.

-Who is Cecilia? –Dergan asked.

-I was my girlfriend for a few years. She was a poet, I published her poems last year, posthumously, of course.

Ruiz now confirmed that that laboratory in Valverde's pharmacy was a closing point, perhaps the zero point in a circle, or the breaking point where the circle breaks at an angle of a few degrees to become a spiral.

-Then, I crossed the two. They had four puppies. They all had the same physical characters as their parents, but more harmonious, as if they were settling down. The parents were what you would call too ugly and deformed. But in the offspring, those same defects had the peculiarity of always being part of them. It was a new breed.

-Why did Ansaldi give him the dogs? –Dergan asked.

This time, Valverde did not look up. He simply took his time, and answered:

-Because he knows that I created them.

-But why does he know it and not the others?

-We have become friends...

-And how does a hotel concierge have more relationship with his experiments than, for example, Dr. Ruiz?

-I already told you, Ansaldi is my friend, not the doctor.

Everyone noticed the change in Valverde's voice. There was no anger, but coldness, perhaps cruelty. Anger is passion, and the pharmacist's voice lacked feeling.

-Listen, doctor. When the babies were three months old, one of them died. I could never explain what happened. In the morning she appeared dead in her cage. So I was left with three, and thus I found myself in a circle with no way out. The dead cub was the only male of the four. I had to develop another one like the parents, who had already died, but I couldn't be sure that he would be born male. I made two failed attempts, the first was a female and had been born without hind legs, the second was a male with completely white hair. I watched them circle around in her cage, trying to decide what to do. Watching the female crawl and moan, I had no choice but to grab her and drown her in the pool. Then I started looking at the male. He was not even ten days old. He was stocky, short-haired and very white, I almost felt proud of that one aspect. He was stumbling around inside the cage, tripping over the water bowl and the small rag ball that he had given him to play with. He collided with the walls and turned around again until he collided with the other. I called him, but he only responded when he got too close to me or when he touched him. He was blind, I told myself, and besides he had no ears. He listened to me when I whispered close to his ears, so he wasn't completely deaf. I checked his eyes with a flashlight. They were dark and completely blind.

A very soft cry, almost whispered, was heard from the other side of the hallway. Valverde paid attention.

-Excuse me, this is my wife, she's calling me.

He came out and they heard the opening and closing of a door, and in between a woman's moan, high-pitched and hoarse at the same time. A few seconds later the smell of gangrene reached them, even stronger than formaldehyde and the dog's corpse. Ruiz, seeing how all this affected Mateo, said:

-She should let me see her, at least once.

"If they amputate her hand, at least they can save her life," said Ibáñez.

-But he doesn't want to, it's as if he recognized her failure in having wanted to cure her himself.

-Who gave him permission to practice medicine, we should denounce him, at least we would save the woman –Dergan intervened.

He found that Ruiz and Ibáñez were looking at him with anger.

-What's wrong with you? Those dogs killed your wife, Mateo, and that was the one who sent them out on the street!

Ibáñez took off his gloves and rubbed his eyes. When they saw his face again, he had a tired glow, a paleness like polished wax that seemed to reflect the meager lamp that hung from the ceiling. -When I leave here, my only job in the next few days will be to kill all those dogs. Let there not be one left. That's what I'm going to do, no matter who gets in my way. Whoever wants to help me, fine, whoever doesn't, stay out of my sight. I don't give a damn about Valverde.

The pharmacist was at the door, for they didn't know how long. He walked in as if he hadn't heard anything and put his gloves back on.

"I crossed the blind male with the other females," he said, continuing his interrupted story. "They had ten offspring in total. Five males and five females. I was very satisfied, I had the exact amount to start a whole new breed. The dogs were all blind, without ears, short tails and the same color and type of hair. They ate heartily and grew normally. He would take them out to the backyard, because he didn't want to show them to anyone yet. But one day I had to do a procedure at the ministry and I was going to close the pharmacy, but Rosa, my wife, told me that she would take care of the business. It wasn't so bad back then, the wound on her hand was oozing but it was enough to cover it with a bandage. When I returned, she surprised me not to hear the puppies barking. I looked for them everywhere, until finally I asked Rosa. She was lying in bed, feverish and crying. They escaped when I opened the patio door, she told me.

"That's how it all started," Dergan said.

-That's right, doctor.

-But I don't understand the reason for these experiments, what he was looking for. I'm not going to believe you if you talk to me about scientific curiosity and all that shit...

-I already told his colleagues a while ago. Life is what I'm looking for. Prolong my wife's life, stop her death, if nothing else is possible.

Dergan laughed.

-Excuse me, but beyond the absurdity, and even if it were possible, it does not ask for anything small.

-I already know it.

-And what do these dogs have to do with avoiding death?

-Nothing yet, that's why I consider myself a failure. But one day someone told me that these dogs, after all, are a way of life, too.

Dergan was beginning to suspect who he had been.

-It was Ansaldi, wasn't it?

Valverde did not answer, and continued:

-Anyway, I had no way of getting them back. They hid very well, until I realized that they had started to reproduce among themselves. People who had seen them said they were all the same, so I assumed the other dogs rejected them.

He had a look of triumph on his face, but Dergan wondered if such cynicism was possible. Could that guy be satisfied with having created a new breed of dog when he said he was seeking to prolong human life? He asked him, because he couldn't keep quiet so much anger that he wasn't sure where it came from. It was a kind of fear that had been born in María Cortéz's house, and that he could not get rid of except in that furious logic that he was unleashing on the pharmacist. The tone and the evident load of contempt seemed like a challenge to Valverde. He understood this, and then a new way of seeing things transformed the pharmacist's expression from the previous gentleness to unmistakable malice and an air of irritating superiority. His green eyes took on new meaning as the smile emerged next. And it was not a smile in which they could feel calm.

Valverde seemed to hesitate before saying anything else, as if two opposing forces were driving him at the same time. Sarcasm perhaps drove him to answer anything, discretion, on the other hand, perhaps tried to curb his growing irritability. Finally, he said something that certainly gave him away in the eyes of others, but when he realized it, he didn't regret it at all. Hiding is not always a merit, and there comes a time when the truth, so complicated, forms its own crust of protection for weak minds. That's how he understood it, because that's how it had always been. Who, perhaps, had understood him in that town from which he had to escape, who in this neighborhood of La Plata, where poor guys like Casas and the prim school teachers lived worriedly in their ordinary trivial lives. Sometimes, he needed to play with them, make jokes that no one liked and yet did nothing but corroborate his superiority to everyone. Because they, without explaining such an attitude to themselves, returned to him, went to him for anything they needed. And they didn't seem to do it out of complacency, but out of a real conviction that this silent guy with austere expressions, with an attractive and intelligent face, was something more. The superiority of malice is a virtue in the eyes of the innocent. Or rather we should say naive. Children are innocent, to a certain extent, because innocence is a state of intellectual and moral ignorance. Innocence can commit evil due to ignorance, but the naive sin from almost absolute passivity. d out of fear, out of shyness, out of inferiority. When they decide to act, the naive commit tragedies, they wreak irreparable havoc, and with their eyes open to that, they decide to have no alternative but to kill themselves, even if they don't do it afterwards. But that unmade decision is a breaking point, it is a death in itself. They know they are dead from that moment.

Knowing that he was naïve, Valverde answered:

-Life is a prisoner of flesh and bones, don't you know that yet? Life is not a chance except for the mental stature of chess pawns. Creating it from nothing is impossible, that is why there is no God other than the one the naive need to feed themselves. I think I have tried everything in my power to prevent Rosa from dying, but until recently I did not realize that life itself transforms without losing its characteristics. Sometimes, we need to settle for seeing in the architecture of a dog the intimate substance of the woman we have loved.

14

It must have been twelve at night. She hadn't slept for almost forty-eight hours. On Saturday night she had barely dozed next to Alma's bed in the hospital. The dim light of the laboratory, the smell of formaldehyde, of gangrene, of old grease impregnated on the marble table, the livid faces of the men who accompanied him, all of this seemed almost like a dream to him. He heard sounds between the ringing in his tired ears, but he couldn't distinguish if they were Rosa Valverde's moans or the barking of the dogs in the street.

-Like a circle, you mean? The dogs are a continuation of his wife, and in turn they killed mine. But I don't see how they can be Soul fragments.

-Let me tell you a legend, doctor...

Dergan laughed in response, without irony, as if he were just listening to a joke.

-But don't you see that he's kidding us? Where is the scientific logic that they boast so much about with their patients? Ruiz, for God's sake! Wake up, my old man!

Ruiz thought, instead, of the circle. The cycle he was involved in.

Food and habitat, habitat and food. Life, death and resurrection.

Yes, he understood it. His friend Ibáñez was beginning to discover that he belonged to one of those circles, different from hers, but ultimately one more. He grabbed Dergan's arm and told her to leave him alone.

Valverde spoke:

-When I was a child, my grandmother, Grandma Valverde, I mean, my father's mother, used to tell me a very old legend, on summer afternoons, when it was getting dark and we would sit on the edge of the river, watching the low flight of mosquitoes on the waters, or listening to the croaking of

frogs. The animals wake up, the animals hunt when the sun begins to decline. Once upon a time, he told me, a town was invaded and massacred by another nomadic town. The victims had, however, the support of a powerful sorceress, so their souls survived in the bodies of the animals for a long time. The invading people, meanwhile, were developing their own decadence in the hands of a false and crazy sorcerer who believed he heard the voices of the gods, but they were nothing more than the voices of the dead.

Valverde paused, looked at them all, and satisfied with the attention they were giving him, he continued.

-There is only one kind of dead, those who wish to return. It was they who spoke to the witcher, creating in his mood a need and a kind of hatred that led him to lead his people to where the dead could steal their bodies. A fight ensued, a great war between the dead settled in the animals and the others. Both sides wanted the same thing, at the end of the day. Everyone wanted to return to life.

-It doesn't tell us anything new, Gustavo. Is there anyone who is satisfied with death? –Ruiz said.

-It is true, but the message of my allegory is not there, but at the end of the story. In the final battle, the animals were transformed into men, and the dead regained their bodies. Then both sides fought like mere men of flesh and blood, and since all flesh is mortal, they all died again. And everything became a dry and inevitable wasteland.

-Then why don't we leave the dead alone, Valverde.

Dergan's voice was friendlier now, as if the common disappointment had calmed his obfuscation. Perhaps he remembered that he had once been told that same legend, which traveled through time and generations, metamorphosing its characteristics and messages according to the place and the occasion, but always firm in the immutable facts of his principles.

-Because we are all part of a circle, of a wheel that turns another larger circle. And my duty is to feel the irremediable need to stop the advance of nothingness, because the thought of absolute zero, of the loss of everything in nothingness, cannot be tolerated. Thinking about that no longer being, hasn't itIt's up to you to stir, your heart doesn't race and your legs don't feel the need to run, your hands to search, your eyes to look at something else, your mind and your memory to rise up like a monster to encompass everything, to find the reason. that alleviates the immense fear? Isn't fear a response, if not adequate, at least temporary and quite satisfactory in itself? The anguish that grows on the edge of that precipice of nothingness is at least a vestige, perhaps the last bastion of life.

A new call was heard from Valverde's wife.

-For me, doctors, any attempt is similar to that anguish that over time forms a pious cloak, thin but with a shine similar to an armor. To deceive that nothingness that attacks every day, insistent and unwavering.

Ruiz understood it very well. Listening to Valverde he had felt how the insects seemed to move through his body, demanding what he supposed was the end of his life and the continuation of his body as waste. Could it be that irrational beings also fear death? Isn't it just another part of the cycle of life for them? Isn't it simply instinct that reveals itself? A war, that is. Valverde had said it well.

-Come on, Dr. Ibáñez, I would like you to check my wife.

He headed towards the door of the laboratory and waited for Mateo to follow him. Ruiz was surprised.

"But she didn't let me..." he began to say, but resigning himself, he stopped Mateo by one arm.

-See if we can still save her, maybe there is time to take her to the hospital.

Ibáñez nodded his head and left with Valverde.

They entered Rosa's room. It was dark. Ibáñez guessed a window through which the scarce light from the street lighting entered, between the twisted wooden rods. He stayed at the door, Valverde had told him to wait. He turned on a floor lamp near the bed. It was strange, he thought later, how the smell arose when the light came on. It was a smell of gangrene too intense not to be felt even in the dark. As if before there was light there was nothing, as if things suddenly emerged from the absolutely black gloom that represents the absence of everything that the senses can capture. Valverde, like a creator god, had given shape and content to that room. He had also created that woman by giving birth.

Mateo approached, internally fighting his revulsion at the smell, more intense and repulsive than the aroma of corpses to which he was already accustomed. He let the pharmacist free his injured hand from the dirty bandages soaked in a yellow, bloody liquid. Then he saw the sick hand, swollen, with edema and bruises on the back and palm, and the deformed fingers. Her main wound was just under her thumb, from there came a fetid and pink secretion, sometimes downright opaque yellow, which Valverde dried while he spoke to Rosa, comforting her. But she was still lying there, with her eyes closed, buried in the mattress and covered with the sheets. She had a pink nightgown, faded, with stains, as if she had rubbed her hand there on several occasions. Her dark hair was shiny with sweat, her face pale and her lips dry.

-He has fever...

-Intermittent, doctor. It's been going up and down for weeks. The antibiotics control it, or controlled it, I must say...

-We have to take her to the hospital.

-There is nothing to do, doctor. You are the only one I tell the truth to. He will soon stop smelling this smell, and another, more beautiful aroma will replace it. But what he wanted to talk to her about is not this, which is nothing more than a transitory state, but about something else. Doesn't she notice anything else in her hand?

Ibáñez approached to see better in the light of the lamp. Her hand was so swollen that he only now realized that her thumb was gone.

-Did the animal that bit her eat it?

-A part yes, but the rest, along with the secretion that came out first, saliva and pus, was food for the dogs of the second litter. Those who did not die and grew strong. Those who escaped, those who, I suspect, Rosa let escape.

At last she completely understood what Valverde had wanted to explain to her with so many twists and turns and so much history in the laboratory. Did she, perhaps, want him to do the same with Alma's body? Give a part to the dogs so that she could live forever? As if Blas wasn't the most perfect decantation of Alma's existence. Then she remembered what the few relatives they both had had said when their son was born: so similar to Mateo, so equal, that the boy seemed to lack the legacy of a woman. Soul without descendants. Soul only love, exhausted in itself as the body is exhausted. Soul like a remote memory that disappears without leaving traces in memory. No mention, no photographs. Only Blas and his father, two men as axesof a caravan in permanent transit. Men and force without meaning, paragons on the sides of a route, with the only need for a look and a presence as weapons, controlling the passage of others, the weak and submissive inhabitants of a society that endorses the power and use of violence as the only means, the only requirements, for tolerance and forgiveness granted by decree by a god absorbed in the color and elegance of his uniform. A god sitting in a chair behind a presidential desk, granting powers to act in his name, to them, to the men who, like Ibáñez, were the symbol of indifference, and to Blas as the future emblem of a country free of weaknesses. Everything bet on children like him, freed from the eccentricities and cowardice of the weak unreason of a woman.

-Think about it, doctor. His wife will survive strongly, and she will never die. As long as dogs reproduce...

Ibáñez looked at Valverde, who was holding his wife's hand as he had held the dog's body a while before, like a thing, an object of study, noble

and respectable, but without the corresponding pain or pity. Then Mateo grabbed Valverde by the lapels of his overalls and pushed him against the wall.

-I'm going to kill those dogs, did he understand me? I'm not going to leave any of them alive.

The pharmacist smiled, and Ibáñez realized that he was looking behind him, perhaps at the hand that he had released and was now hanging from the bed, letting the pus fall onto the floor.

-Do you know how many there must be now...

-Whoever it is, I'm not going to leave until I kill everyone.

-I offer you a kind of eternity, doctor, and you respond with vengeance, that perhaps... isn't it a kind of death?

-You are a corpse, Valverde, that's why you don't understand it.

Mateo Ibáñez went out into the hallway and tried to orient himself in the vertigo he felt when he left the smell of the room behind. The hallway, dark as it had been since the afternoon, only allowed the light of the laboratory to be seen. He saw his friends and said to them:

-Let's go.

Dergan and Ruiz followed him, anxious to know what had happened between him and the pharmacist, but they did not ask him anything, not even when they were already outside and walking back to the hotel. It was two o'clock. Ibáñez stopped against the walls every few meters, holding on so as not to fall. He hadn't eaten anything since Saturday night, he hadn't slept in almost two days. Dergan and Ruiz held him on each arm and helped him continue. All that was left was for the dogs to appear, the three of them thought at the same time, without communicating that fear. They arrived at the hotel and Ansaldi opened the door for them.

-Good evening, doctors.

They didn't answer him. They took Ibáñez to his room, where Márquez and Blas were sleeping. They shook the architect and he woke up.

-They're back, they have to tell me what happened all day.

-We're going to tell you, but we're going to put Mateo to bed. Tell the old man to prepare something, a strong coffee or tea, with a lot of sugar.

Walter went down, but found Ansaldi entering his room. He called out to him, but he didn't pay attention. The old man had shed all the irritating condescension with which he had treated them before. He should no longer consider it necessary. He went to the kitchen and made some hot coffee. In the refrigerator he found sandwiches and also took them upstairs. The

others had already undressed and put Mateo between the sheets. He was asleep.

-Let him sleep, tomorrow we will make him have a good breakfast.

-Tomorrow is going to be a day of a thousand quilombos -said Ruiz.- Farías is going to want Alma's autopsy.

-But we tell you about Valverde...

-You believe? I know the guy more than you, Mauricio. Valverde is going to make those dogs disappear tonight.

-But then what are we doing here, let's go...

Ruiz stopped him by the arm...

-What are you going to do? Break in by force? We are in military government, now. If we draw attention, they put us in prison. I would try to explain it to Farías first, if he believes us.

Dergan was still nervous. Ruiz made him leave the room. Márquez followed them, closing the door and turning off the lights. Ibáñez seemed asleep, but perhaps he heard the conversation. He didn't care too much, because he, in his dreams, planned other plans. Blas was next to him in bed, he hadn't woken up in the entire time since they had returned.

Don't listen to Valverde, he told his son in his dreams, you're going to remember mom. But Blas, Mateo thought, is nothing more than a child whose conscious memory is still as weak as a soft, shapeless clay cup.

fifteen

The three went down to the dining room and sat around the table. Walter offered to make coffee for everyone.

-I would have something stronger...-said Mauricio.- Will there be any liquor, cognac, whiskey?

-Who knows where the old man keeps that, I don't even want to see it from afar.

-How will the boy continue?- Ruiz asked.- Tomorrow I will call the hospital first thing in the morning. Now I better go to sleep.

HEHe got up and left, barely murmuring good night. He looked tired, with purple circles under his pale face, his skinny body was slightly hunched

over, and he was clutching his stomach with one hand. Mauricio made a face of relief, he needed to talk to Walter alone. He had to ask him something, and he knew Bernardo wouldn't understand. He was an excellent guy, but sometimes too rigid with what he did not understand or agree with, in that he had inherited the character of his father. It was curious how, as he matured and the memory of the old doctor's figure lost influence, he became more and more like him.

Mauricio looked under the reception counter, Walter in the kitchen cupboards.

-I found something! –Dergan said. It was a bottle of bourbon. He returned to the dining room looking at the etiquette. The bottle was open, but still three-quarters full. He put it on the table and asked:

-Do you like bourbon?

Walter hesitated before answering.

-Yes and no, just a half glass, otherwise I'll have a hangover tomorrow.

He brought two glasses from the kitchen, Mauricio poured them both. When they put them to their lips, Walter coughed and Mauricio laughed like a boy.

-The reputable mother who gave birth to you! –Márquez said, he also laughing now.

Mauricio poured him another glass, even though the other refused. Then Walter drank again, and so did Dergan. At the third drink, Walter felt dizzy and held on to the table even though he was sitting.

-They say that Hemingway was a regular at this, he must have had a liver as big as a twenty kilo bag of potatoes.

-That's how he died, but we are not writers, we do not live for posterity.

Walter looked at him seriously, he had an expression between happy and sad at the same time, his face had turned red and his eyes were sparkling.

-You will say it for yourself, but I do leave descendants.

-But hadn't your daughter died?

Mauricio was not generally tactless, but he was also already under the influence of alcohol. Walter started to tear up and smiled again.

-My works, Mauricio, my houses and buildings, do you understand?

-You're right, then the only idiot is me, without children and only saving fucking animals.

-But dogs and cats make people happy, cows give us food, or don't you cure cows, do you?

-Sometimes, yes...-Mauricio now couldn't stop laughing. –You're right, when animals make people happy, they lame and make children, and thus I am an instrument of posterity.

-That's how it is...

"What a stupid consolation, Walter," he said, while they both laughed out loud, hiding their faces in their arms so as not to wake the others.

But after a while, Dergan became serious and said:

- I have to ask you something.

-Whatever you want -Walter tried another glass, but Mauricio stopped him.

-I want you to go to the house you designed tomorrow. A woman lives there with her daughter. Her name is María Cortéz, and you have to ask her what her maiden name is.

Walter looked at him strangely, then mischievously.

"It's not for that," said Mauricio, remembering the displeasure he had suddenly felt while he was making love to that woman, while he received the prophetic words from her mouth, who had only interrupted her kisses to say that prayer. – This morning I rummaged through Ansaldi's papers, I found documents from when he came from Europe. They are too rare, and I can't explain to you now, but the mother was called Sottocorno. I think I remember that Cortéz's last name is the same, but you have to ask her.

-And why don't you go?

He couldn't tell Márquez what had happened to him in that house, it was too much for the architect to understand in that drunken state.

-Can't...

-But why?! I haven't visited that house since the collapse...

Mauricio did not know exactly what had happened to the house and the architect. He probably had the story of it, but the memory of the dream upon leaving the house prevented him from even approaching it again. He now laughed internally at that boast of rationality that he had demonstrated in Valverde's pharmacy. He had reproached the doctors for believing the pharmacist's nonsense when he himself was afraid of a fortune teller's prophecy.

But there are fears that cannot be controlled, that find nourishment beneath the surface of logic, and make their roots grow, expanding until they encompass everything that constitutes the volume of bodies. And then it blooms, and its flowers are beautiful until the moment you smell them. A scared man is a hallucination in the distance, a speeding truck when we are close, a knife covered in a poisonous vine when we touch it.

"It's important, Walter, please," he said, squeezing her hand, hoping, perhaps, that Walter would feel that kind of harsh, pitiful withered flowers that made up his fear. And he felt There was, in the hand of the architect, something similar. Not dead flowers, but the smell of rotting wood, dead animals, perhaps corpses under rubble.

Walter rubbed his face, waking up for a moment from his drowsiness. He nodded, without saying or promising anything. But Mauricio knew that he was going to do what he had asked.

16

On Monday morning, Walter heard footsteps and movements outside his room. He opened his eyes and looked at the time. It was almost ten in the morning.

"My God," he said, realizing that there was a knock on the door.

-Who is it?

-The service, sir.

Walter had fallen asleep, just today, with everything that was coming. Alma's autopsy, the investigation of the dogs, his own task as an architect, that is, the search for the animals' hiding places in the urban structure of La Plata. But above all there was something he had to do first, and it was the first thing he remembered because it was the last thing he heard the night before, already late. He remembered, between the bourbon daydreams and the headache this morning, that the veterinarian had asked him to visit the house. His mansion, because even though it no longer belonged to him, he had designed it for him and his wife, in another time, so close and so far at the same time. So immersed in that unnameable space that we describe as wonderful simply because it has already passed, and by the mere fact of being irrecoverable it protects it - and protects us - from all revelation and disappointment. He wraps it with illusory masks that are not lies as long as we do not remove the masks. The gold of the past is sometimes the most irreproachable food. We just have to protect it from the always imminent edge of suspicion, which like a threat in a tangent line that sometimes fails,

then tends to sneak between the planes of the dream, to intimidate us, to reveal the specks of dust in the gold nuggets of the past. . When there is nothing but dirt between the hands, when the food is mud and the palate becomes so dry that the cracks of the human tissue can no longer support water, because then it would definitively crumble, it is time to give rest to the commendable will to resist failure, and abandon oneself, let oneself be in the future like someone rocking in the waters of a rainy and cold sea.

He got up and washed his face in the bathroom. They insisted again at the door.

-Come back in fifteen minutes! –He shouted, tired of that senseless insistence. Surely Ansaldi, resentful of them, wanted to screw them.

-I'm Bernardo!

Walter opened the door in his pajamas, his face still deep in sleep and a toothbrush in his right hand. He returned to the bathroom and Ruiz followed him, talking to him.

"But there's a lot to do, old man," Ruiz told him. "Farías called me at eight in the morning, the son of a bitch." He waits for Mateo to sign the consent for the autopsy.

Walter listened to him while he brushed his teeth.

-I didn't dare wake him up after almost two days without sleep, and with everything that happened. Maybe he got up alone to have breakfast an hour ago. I don't know how he has the willpower to accept all this mess.

Walter looked at him through the medicine cabinet mirror, rinsed his mouth and turned on the shower.

-What did he tell you about the investigation?

-Everything remains the same, you have to go through the municipality to pick up the city plans, then walk and explore. You already know. We need to find out where the dogs live, where they are raised.

The architect undressed and got under the shower.

-You and Dergan got into a mess last night. I don't blame them, but...

-But what? Do not be a killjoy. I didn't mean to get upset, we just talked and the bottle was there. Now everything about the weekend seems like a dream to me.

-It's true, and you weren't in Valverde's pharmacy. Well, he left you. Mateo is waiting for me.

-And who is going to take care of the boy?

-Now Mauricio, later, whoever is available. Mateo doesn't want anyone else with Blas, and doesn't want Ansaldi to get close. Above all, no one takes the boy out of the hotel.

Ruiz left and Walter turned off the shower, dried himself with the white towel with a logo announcing: Hotel Firenze. Only now did he catch her attention. Why such a pretentious name for that mediocre hotel. However, he only seemed capricious to her. La Plata, more than a South American city, had a more European urban structure. The styles of the houses, the wide sidewalks, the types of fluted and yellow tiles, the cobblestones of the streets with the design in arches, the trees joining their branches above, were more related to the appearance of an early European city. half of the 20th century than with the rural or rural areas of the province of Buenos Aires. In reality, each town in the province, and especially those closest to the coast, had a similar appearance, until that style became something p clothes Something intermediate between a town and a city. There, where the warehouses still survived with their stained glass windows and high doors, the ceilings with fans moving like turtles on an axis, the mahogany counters with display cases, the metal or wooden boxes with sweet cookies. There, where the Japanese dry cleaners were of a neatness bordering on the extravagance of the legendary country from which they seemed to have been transported. There, where bakeries, like Casas's, or Valverde's pharmacy, were places where mothers could start talking, while the kids looked at the chocolates and Easter eggs, or the colorful bottles with the strange medicines in them. that they feared but were attracted to.

She got dressed and went down to have breakfast. Dergan was also coming down at that moment, with Blas in his arms. They greeted each other without speaking, confirming their mutual headache. The cook protested about the time. Nobody deigned to look at her. Ansaldi was standing behind the reception desk, writing on his papers. Through the entrance came the cool of the morning and the intense sun of that Monday that seemed to be a rebirth, a new hope. But for whom or what, Walter wondered.

-You're going? –Dergan said.

-After breakfast, don't worry. I have to go get the plans from the municipality.

Mauricio accepted in silence. Like the day before, he had to babysit, but this time he wanted to do things right. He would stay in the hotel the entire time, without taking his eyes off Blas, and watching that Ansaldi did not approach.

Márquez went up to his room, put on a light brown tie, adjusting it under the collar of his white shirt, then the vest and jacket of his beige suit. He looked in the mirror at his freshly shaved face, put on a few drops of

perfume, grabbed his camel skin overcoat, checked that his moccasins were polished, and left the hotel. He was a neat man, perhaps excessively so, according to his wife, except when he worked on construction sites. He then dressed in casual clothes to mingle with the bricklayers and give all the necessary instructions without worrying about dirt and dust. But when this happened, that inveterate neatness, with which he had perhaps been born and which he could never get rid of, nor could he avoid being left-handed, was channeled into the extreme care and detail of what he was building. Because even though he was not the one who placed brick on brick, - sometimes he had even done it- his mind built with the same effort with which the workers worked with the strength of their muscles, of their backs strengthened by rough work. , but that not long after they would suffer. Neurons, although different, are also cells like muscles, the energy used by them comes from the same sources. Why, then, make differences, evaluations that have no other objective than determining an arbitrary and singularly unjust labor policy.

But the architect Walter Márquez had a latest model car, suits that he had made by a tailor in Buenos Aires. He bought imported perfumes, and supplied his wife with the best dresses and the best food from the restaurants. He had a house on the coast, lots in Córdoba and Mendoza. A bank account that is abundant but not excessively so. The tax authorities never persecuted him, they never demanded anything from him. His library was made up of almost a hundred books on design and architecture, a lot of North American poetry and a collection of long plays where the records of Miles Davis and the old Bach stood out. Inside, for the thought that occurred when he traveled alone in his car. towards any of the works he was building, he knew he was a gray man, a persecuted man, as one of his friends had told him, a man who needed everything around him to know himself inside a huge room with a roof and protective walls. . He felt chills at night, even if it was summer, when he stayed up until the wee hours of the morning sitting on the stool in front of the drawing board, his elbows propped up and his hands moving back and forth from his forehead to the paper, as if the pencil he was His fingers held either an instrument capable of charging ideas to transport them to paper or a battery that was recharged when he left them in the pencil holders - brought by him from abroad or given as gifts by friends - during the hours when he was not in his studio. .

He looked at the bright sun that Monday morning. The Firenze hotel was a flat, unattractive façade, but the streets of La Plata always promised something new. Maybe it was the intense sun on the sidewalks, or the sensation of an eternally still afternoon resting on the cobblestones. There he had tried to live with his wife, but the collapse of the house and the death of his daughter had ruined everything. He walked through the same blocks as a few years before, contemplating the square in front of the bakery, the Santos bar, the mechanical workshop of Aníbal's family. He remembered everything exactly as he was now.

He reached the corner in front of Costa's warehouse. He stopped, a lump forming in his throat. It was closed, with the metal curtains drawn down and covered in rust, with political party graffiti on the walls, and mold growing in the corners of the walls and ceiling. He thought he saw Costa, like the night of the collapse, running in his underwear along the sidewalk, looking for his son. He heard himself shout, again, to the boy passing by on his bicycle just as one of the wings of the building began to fall. He remembered the storekeeper's face when he opened the door of the ambulance where Márquez was waiting to be taken to the hospital, asking about the boy, and him saying that he had tried to shout at him, to warn him. But how, he would ask himself later, how to explain to a parent that a child who dies is no longer a boy. It is something outside of classifications and names, something that he, Walter Márquez, architect and creator, would understand later that same night.

In the same hospital where he was treated, his wife had been taken in premature labor. When he woke up in her room, the doctors had told him that the girl was very small, that perhaps his wife's shock at the collapse had contributed, but they couldn't say for sure. She was a girl, they told her. And he knew, he thought as the doctors continued talking, that a couple of children had perished because of him.

He noticed that his hands were shaking. A cold sweat ran down his back. Monday morning traffic was light. The kids had already started school, the businesses had renewed their merchandise from the delivery trucks. Only the neighbors came and went, shopping, talking on the doorsteps of their houses. There were cars leaving the garages, others stopping honking at someone they knew. There was bustle but it was not strident, it was organized, peaceful chaos. A destruction and construction consummated behind the facades of the apparent, invisible and so perfect that only the results could be seen: the clear morning and the human world passing serenely along the rigid rails of time.

Later he learned that Costa had bought the remains of the house. The grocer had repaired it and finished it. And now there he saw her, tall and beautiful, with a majesty that did not contrast with the rest of the neighborhood because there was a large space of free land around it. When Costa died, Casas bought it, and now rented it to María Cortéz.

He had to do what he had promised Dergan. It seemed stupid, if she thought about it, but the vet had asked him so insistently, and he had seen so much fear in his eyes, that he could do nothing but keep his word. But he was also afraid. That house was like a ghost. He had left it destroyed and now he saw it completely finished. He wasn't used to that. He liked to see his works grow, like a doctor who controls the pregnancy of one of his patients. Thus, like when his daughter had grown in the womb of his wife, he had controlled the birth of that mansion that he had unintentionally aborted.

The house and the girl.

He saw a little girl of a few years come out of the door, stand under the eaves, observe the street, then go to the side of the house and knock with a high-pitched, sweet voice. Three dogs appeared running from the bottom. They followed her to the door and sat down to wait. She came out with a bag that she carried to the front yard, as the animals followed her, and then she emptied the bag onto the grass. They were bones with raw meat. The animals pounced on them and took aside a piece each.

Márquez stared at the girl. He must have been the age his daughter would now be if she had lived. Yes, he told himself, sighing. That house was my daughter, if she had lived I would have continued building the house. It would not be like this one, with an austere finish and a lack of style, as only a grocer could have done, but rather a very different one. An elegant and distinguished Victorian house. With white walls and exposed brick, with mahogany doors and windows open to the eastern sun. Gabled roofs with proper tiles, chimneys in every room rising towards the city sky like in foggy old London.

A house like that he had promised Griselda. How many times had they talked about the decoration and the furniture, how many other times had they imagined themselves sitting on Saturday nights in the library of their new house reading stories and poems aloud, so that their children would grow up with the sound of good grammar. in their ears, forming their future thoughts, making distinctions and criticisms, giving them the food to create a personality. But he would no longer have children, and although Griselda had not refused However, he had a feeling that her despondency would never disappear, because this despondency had another source, and it was the guilt that emanated from him. Walter had a permanent source of guilt, and first of all was the death of the Costa boy. And that was something he couldn't make go away as long as the past was what it is, something irremediable, then Griselda's dejection wouldn't go away either. A child's abstinence therefore became as inevitable as the air they breathed.

What he now saw was another house and another girl, even though they had the virtue of reminding him of the ones he had lost. What is lost maybe found again? No matter how different it looks? It was a beautiful consolation, and his heart began to warm as in the first encounter with someone we do not know and whom we wish to love forever. The encounter with what we have imagined all our lives.

He entered the garden, passed the dogs, who looked at him sideways and growled. The girl had already entered. He knocked on the door, then saw the bell on the side. He didn't want to call again. The girl drew the white curtain of the window and looked through the glass. She had a stern and serious look, but kind. She smiled at him for a moment, before leaving the window and opening the door.

-Good morning, could you tell me if your mother would be kind enough to assist me?

Suddenly, he laughed internally at that excuse. He hadn't planned anything beforehand, it didn't even occur to him what he would say to justify the question he was going to ask: what is her maiden name, ma'am.

The girl stepped back a little, leaving the door open. From the end of a hallway came a very beautiful woman, with dark eyes and black hair.

-Good morning, what can she offer you?

-Excuse me, my name is Walter Márquez, I am an architect, and I was the one who designed this house.

She looked at him as if she didn't understand the purpose of such a visit.

-The owner is the owner of the bakery, Mr. Márquez. She must talk to him about any matter related to the house.

-I'm sorry that I expressed myself poorly, it was just a presentation, Mrs. Cortéz.

-Then I don't understand you. My daughter has to have lunch early because she goes to school in the afternoon…

-If it were possible for her to give me an appointment at another time...

-So that?

Walter did not understand such abruptness. She was supposed to be a clairvoyant, or fortune teller, or whatever the correct name for her was, and that character was supposed to scare away customers. Maybe she was just crazy.

-To see the inside of the house, ma'am... I'm making a catalog of my works and their development over time...

-Well, then come in and look at what you want. We're in the kitchen, if you need me.

She moved to the side to let him pass. She looked more sullen with every second, more irritated, and Walter saw a gleam in her eyes. What was she thinking, he told himself. Something important was going through her mind since she had seen him standing at the door. The more he talked to her or tried to be nice, the more irritated she seemed to get. Did she know him, or did she know about him and her house? She didn't expect that. Or maybe she saw something else about himself that he couldn't see?

The woman took her daughter to the kitchen, while she turned her head to look at him. He toured the main room first, and it was the exact measurements he remembered. It was almost empty, except for a couple of heavy old furniture, a single sofa and carved wooden chairs. He seemed larger because of that apparent emptiness, and his steps echoed with a barely audible echo, but one that took on the intensity of a low whistle

toward the stairwell that led to the first floor. He climbed the steps, hearing the wood resonate, creaking, complaining, as if he were protesting his visit.

The house and the woman.

They were both irritated with her presence.

Why this occurred to him, he did not know, although he was aware that it was absurd. He had been like the god of that house, he had designed not only the forms but the usefulness and layout of the rooms, after all the essence of a house, which is its practicality. The warmth of home combined with protection from the outside world. An architect not only decides a structure, but also the air that will inhabit that house, the winds that will flow through the interior according to the arrangement of the windows, the warmest corners according to the heating and fire in the homes. An architect plans the future steps of its inhabitants, and thus he arranges the location of the kitchen, the bedrooms, the bathroom, the study room and the games room. Isn't he, then, a fortune teller, like every creator? Perhaps the woman envied him that, but such an idea seemed fictitious to her.

The first floor creaked with every inch of the sole of his shoes. The doors to the rooms were open, the beds were messy. Some rooms were empty, with the floorboards or lifted, tools and loose nails, which must have been abandoned there for years. He did not recognize the rest of the house, because when he left he had not yet finished deconstructing the second floor. Costa had to modify it to his liking.

He heard some dogs barking. He looked out a hallway window and saw them in the backyard, running and playing. From the street came the strangled voice of a loudspeaker announcing the upcoming opening of a barbershop. Then he had a series of screenshots that momentarily hid reality and he saw what he had seen the night of the collapse. From that same place, nothing more than still without a roof and forming only a terrace, he had seen the boy from Costa pass by with his bicycle. And he had screamed just a second before the floor collapsed. Afterwards, he only remembered the ambulance. But now also a part of the present, or the immediate past, had disappeared, because without knowing how long, the woman was behind him and watched him tremble. He wiped the sweat from his forehead to hide the trembling of his hands, but he could smell the smell of perspiration overcoming the aroma of the perfume he had put on that morning.

"You are not welcome in this house," she said.

-I think I have realized that very well, ma'am.

-There is the soul of a restless child since you arrived.

This time he didn't respond.

-What did you come for?

-Just one question, Mrs. Cortéz. What is his maiden name?

She looked at him first in surprise, then she looked out of the stairwell towards the ground floor. The daughter was leaving for school at that moment.

-Let's go down, Mr. Márquez, the noises are less noticeable than here.

They sat on two chairs in the large room. She brought two cups of tea, poured two tablespoons of sugar into each, stirred both, and offered one to the architect.

-Why do you want to know? "She," she asked him.

-Even I don't know exactly, but I suppose it's all related to the research on wild dogs.

Maria Cortez nodded and took a sip of her tea. She was upright in her chair, her back straight, her hands busy holding the plate and cup as if they were holding the balance of the world.

-Sottocorno, that's my last name.

Walter felt, at the same time that everything fit into a certain but unknown order to him, a kind of very ancient, even primitive fear.

-And who was Marietta, if she allows me to ask?

-My great grandmother. She married my great-grandfather, Gregorio Ansaldi, in Italy, of course.

-Do you know Mr. Ansaldi, the owner of the “Firenze” hotel?

-How can I not know him, he is my uncle for the third degree. When my husband and I came to live here, I didn't even know he existed. One day, after my husband died, he came to visit me. He told me about my entire family. Since then, I have more serenely accepted my… abilities. She left the tea on the table and clasped her hands on her skirt, looking down, like an embarrassed virgin.

Walter told himself that she was a great fraud. But he couldn't have accused her out loud.

-I don't like to boast about what I am, Mr. Márquez, I only accept it for my own peace of mind. But I'm not adept at giving myself names or qualifying what I do. Many before me have done it, for example, my great-grandmother, since she is relevant.

-I would like to know more about that, if you don't mind.

-She predicted the future, they even said she had visions of the past. That is more surprising now than in those times, because science has accustomed us to doubt, but whoever sees the future only sees the circles and spirals of time. At first, when I started listening to my voices as a girl, I didn't understand it. It cost me too much, because I refused to accept it. Since I am in this house, I live more serenely. And you understand it perfectly, I imagine.

-Because it says?

-Come on, Mr. Márquez, I just told you a while ago, upstairs. There is the soul of a child, which has moved restlessly since you entered. I had already felt it before, but it was one of the sleeping voices among many others. Since this morning he has been screaming, and I swear that I am having a hard time maintaining this calmness in that he now sees me.

Walter stood up from the chair and dropped the porcelain cup with pink flowers on the floor. Maria looked at the pieces with pity, then looked up with resentment.

-The cup doesn't matter, but it does matter that you are so hypocritical.

-You don't know anything about that boy.

Maria smiled and covered her mouth with her hand.

-Excuse me, I don't usually laugh at my clients, but you're not one of them, I guess. He told me everything about the collapse. You dreamed something too ambitious, and ambition is born from fear. The fear of dying, like you saw your father die in a hospital bed. Fear makes us commit more crimes than we want to avoid. It's a big trap for fools.

Walter came back He sat down and hid his face in his hands.

"I've already paid for that..." she said.

-I already know it. Her little daughter...

Maria approached him and placed a hand on Walter's. When he looked, she saw her looking at him with pity. She was so beautiful now, so motherly and loving at the same time, that he could have kissed her.

-I'm going to tell him something to console him. My great-grandfather Ansaldi was an inventor, he was a technical genius of the time. There were also many rumors that he was an alchemist, that he experimented with substances, they even said that he was a magician. He knew anatomy and physics. He had set out to prolong life. He was much older than my great-grandmother, and he was already known throughout Europe because of his experiences and his travels. He was even in these areas when there were only indigenous people. But since he had a bad reputation he hid, and he only allowed himself to be found by those who paid him well or really

needed his talents. They were not usually good people, of course, because they were generally vindictive who sought to harm another. He, of course, had no prejudices in accepting.

Maria sat down again, touched the teapot with one hand and asked:

-Another cup?

Walter looked at her sweetly, picked up the pieces from the floor and accompanied her to the kitchen.

-Do you really believe in all that legend that Ansaldi told you? “Him,” he asked, while he watched her fill the kettle with water from the tap and then put it on the stove.

Offering him sweet cookies, he answered with another question:

-Why not? If I doubted that, I would be doubting my own ability, and that is impossible for me. I have lived, reluctantly and with great effort, with this ability since I was a child. Only a while ago I relented, I accepted what I am because now I know that I am not the only one who has suffered because of it.

-So his great-grandmother Marietta also suffered?

-Of course, that's why she married Ansaldi. They met in Florence. He had been married once, and many versions surrounded that marriage. Some said that he had killed her, others that she had died of syphilis. Go find out the truth. They had no children, but what was born from that marriage was his obsession with prolonging life. If you ask my opinion, I would tell you that I do not know the objective of such a purpose. That's what I told my uncle when he told me all this. Then he answered me with something so obvious that I felt stupid. She told me that I should not feel that way, because I, like my great-grandmother, having the future in my hands, contemplating it as another plane of the present, seemed so natural to me to conceive of time as a single entity, that I did not understand the need to others, or fear, I already told you, that arises from the interruption of life, from the vision of absolute nothingness after death.

-I don't understand…

She looked at him smiling and caressed his chin. Without answering, she put the tea service back on the tray and returned to the living room. Walter followed her and allowed himself to be served once again. Maria went to the window. It must have been after twelve.

-Look there. What do you see?

Walter stood up with the cup in one hand and drew the curtain with the other.

-The city, the people...

-Very good. But what if there were no people?

-The city... -he looked at her, as if waiting for her approval-... still.

-Very good. Like an eternity, right?

-As long as the buildings last, at least...

-Perfect, Mr. Márquez, and you know, because you build them, that they last longer than men.

-I still don't understand what it has to do with...

-My head, like my great-grandmother's, is a city with many empty houses. Those houses, like this one, have their history. I just listen to them.

Walter approached her again and looked at her as if he were seeing her for the first time.

-I see in her eyes that she is beginning to understand it. Gregorio Ansaldi married Marietta Sottocorno because she knew the future, probably with much more skill than I, and could you tell me what is better than that to master death?

They both stayed silent for a while, looking at each other, but she suddenly burst out laughing. That laugh didn't seem usual for her, at least not that almost naive type of laugh. Her cheeks turned pink and her eyes shone, she put her hands up to her face to brush her hair away from her forehead, but she seemed embarrassed, eager to stop that laugh that made her feel ridiculous. But this was not what Walter was thinking, but rather how beautiful she looked at that moment.

-Excuse me, please, but if you saw your face in a mirror... if you don't close it, flies will get in...

Walter noticed her and closed his mouth, but he did it so hard that her teeth clicked, and she laughed harder. He could do nothing but do the same, sitting in the chair across from her and grabbing Maria's hands.

She did not resist, that man's hands were warm and genuinely pleasant, without ulterior motives. She looked at the palms of Walter and ran his small fingers over the lines of the skin.

-What do you see? –he asked.

-I don't read hands, I don't know how to do it well.

-Don't be modest, tell me what you see in my future.

She smiled at him.

-Don't worry, Mr. Márquez, you will die very old.

17

Walter left the house. He looked back when he reached the sidewalk and saw that María was still at the door, waving at him. She had received him coldly and bid him farewell warmly. What had he done to earn that trust, she wondered. Perhaps she felt pity for him, more than the dead people she heard about in that house could lead her to feel. He probably deserved pity and not pity, because it wasn't second-hand condolences or redemption, but simply feeling sorry for someone. A feeling that is incomprehensible to many, due to its lack of practicality and the absolute absence of purpose for both the person granting it and the object of that punishment. It is too short to console us, and too similar to tolerance and indifference to feel close to the being who grants it to us. It is not love, not even affection, it is a cold concession of feelings, as if even they had a mask to cover themselves when they go out on rainy days, when beggars and sick children are more sincere about their own mediocrity.

He couldn't tell if there was sadness on that woman's face or something else, he felt confused but not sad, as he expected. Three dogs ran towards him and started barking without approaching or touching the fence. He looked at them as he walked down the sidewalk, looking for a view of the backyard. He saw two more dogs emerge from a hole between a wall of the house and the side yard. It was a good place for animals to take shelter, but all the ones he saw were ordinary dogs. He walked away, taking frequent glances at the house and the dogs, until he turned the corner of Costa's old warehouse, and could no longer see her.

He continued walking a couple of blocks, passing the square. He found Santos' bar, tried to look through the window, all the tables were empty. He looked out the door and saw the owner behind the counter, leaning on his elbows and with his head resting on his hands. The thick blond mustache moved like someone snoring, and Walter realized that he was drowsy. He coughed as he entered. The radio broadcast a tango program, interrupted by commercials and news of the new government. Santos opened his eyes, startled, and immediately stretched out an arm toward the bottle next to him. Walter couldn't help but smile at this reflex action of someone who has been serving drinks for years.

He had met Santos the first day he and Griselda arrived in La Plata. They had nowhere to eat, and it was the first bar they found. Back then he looked the same as he does now: tall and robust, intensely attractive with that blonde mustache, straight chin, aquiline nose and straight hair combed

back, with slight curls that stood up at the nape of his neck. The white apron was always gray but he couldn't say it was dirty, just used, with an aroma of old wine and olive oil. He was single, and although later, at the age of forty he would marry and have an only daughter, at this time he was a lonely man who only looked for women with a difficult mix of chivalry and obscenity in equal proportions. They had told her that Gaspar Santos had slept with many women in the neighborhood, almost all of them married, and with some teacher whose virginity he had taken. It was likely, seeing him standing there behind the counter, chest hair sticking out of his apron, shoulders broad, expression grim like that of a Greek warrior. In one hand he had a towel, in the other the bottle, but looking at him you would say he was holding a sword and a shield.

-Good morning, Saints.

-But what a pleasure to see you again, architect! I haven't seen him since...

It wasn't irony, but simple confusion. He had been one of the few who didn't speak ill of him when the collapse happened. Embarrassed, Santos did not know how to continue.

-Okay, a lot of water has passed under the bridge, so to speak. And what do you tell me?

-You see, I'm bored out of my mind. Few come to lunch at noon anymore, but I continue with my habit of not closing in the afternoon. From 7 a.m. to 11 p.m., as always.

Walter knew that he only tended the bar, made the meals, cleaned, placed the orders. He had no family, the bar was his wife.

-What do you offer, architect? Just sit down, you have a table to choose from today.

-Well, since you're at it, make me a grilled steak.

"And a red wine from a good vintage," said Santos, turning to look at the wine rack. "I already have what you're going to like."

He showed him a 1962 Cabernet. Walter agreed and went to sit down. Santos returned immediately to put the oilcloth tablecloth, the glass, the cutlery and the bread. He opened the bottle, commenting on the weather, poured the glass and let Walter taste it. The wine was as mild in flavor as its tint.

-I like it that way, architect. And what brings you to visit? Did he come with his wife and his son? When about the house, The lady was waiting, if I'm not mistaken.

-Yes, Santos, but we had a girl who died at birth.

-The bitch...! -Santos murmured from the side, bit his lips and tried to excuse himself: - I have a mouth stupider than my head, I'm very sorry...

-Don't worry, that time is behind us. Now I'm here to investigate the dogs.

-Yes, the white dogs, those that come out at night. They have wreaked havoc in the area. I had a lot of problems because they destroyed the garbage bags that I left at the door. In the morning this was a pigsty. I complained to the municipality but they did nothing. One night I grabbed a stick and stood at the door of the business. When they appeared I went out to hit them, to see if they would get scared and not come back.

-And what happened?

Santos looked at him for a few seconds and ran his hand through his hair, smiling. His light eyes were so beautiful that anyone could have been conquered by him at that moment. Walter, curiously, felt self-conscious, somewhat nervous, and hid in the silence where he was waiting for an answer.

-If I tell you... I had to run. There were two that I saw when I confronted them, but later several more appeared. My God, I told myself, I'm not getting out of here alive. They began to surround me, I looked everywhere moving the broomstick, but they approached me without fear. Then it occurred to me to climb onto the pile of garbage, and from there I jumped into the street. I started running with everything, but it wasn't until two blocks later that I realized that they hadn't followed me. They were left to rummage through the garbage. I spent more than an hour walking around, until I saw from a distance that everyone had gone. I went back to the business, and suddenly I was afraid that they had broken in, because like an idiot I left the door open.

Santos looked towards the kitchen and said:

-Your steak!

He returned five minutes later with the plate of juicy meat and a halved tomato with oregano and salt.

-Thank you, but keep telling me.

-Well, none of them had gotten involved, luckily. After that I no longer put bags with leftover food, especially meat.

-And then where do you throw the waste?

-The garbage guys leave me some plastic bins with lids, so I put together what's worth a couple of days and they come to look for them. It costs me extra, but at least I avoid the carnage every morning in front of the business.

-Do you think they come for the meat?

Santos was still standing, respectful of his position and also of his merits as the owner of the house.

-Sure, sometimes I have put out bags with vegetables, and they didn't even show up. But...if you allow me to ask...what are you going to do, as an architect, I say?

-They invited me to study the streets, the shelters where they can hide. I have to go look for the plans, but I'm already late. –He looked at the clock, it was two o'clock. Then he asked, while he started the second half of his steak, and letting Santos fill his wine glass every time he saw it a little empty: -Do you have any idea where they could hide?

Santos scratched his chin, then his mustache, and looked out into the street, as if he wasn't sure what he was going to say would be taken seriously.

-Look, those here say that it comes from anywhere, from the surrounding fields, from the abandoned houses. But one day I saw them in the vacant lot next to Antonio Centurión's barbershop. Do you remember him?

-Yes, I met with him a couple of times.

-Well, you know that he is involved in politics, right? It turns out that two weeks ago they killed two kids from his party in that vacant lot, they shot them, to be more precise, against the wall that borders the barbershop. It was at dawn, and a teacher, Clara, the one who married Casas, saw them as she passed by on the sidewalk. She said she could tell by the blood stains on the wall. Centurión closed the barbershop and they say that he wants to leave the city, he insists that it was the opposition who killed those kids. They were fifteen and eighteen year old boys, all they did was put up posters and paint graffiti. But it seems to me, Márquez, if you'll excuse the indiscretion... -he approached the architect's ear- I think the soldiers killed them. Then he walked away again and winked to confirm his complicity. He looked around, at the street and even inside the business itself, as if suddenly an uncertain fear had intrigued him with his distraction and someone he had not seen enter was listening to him.

They say that the walls have eyes and ears, that spies hide under the tables, and behind the curtains the old pimps of the governments in power hear. Márquez followed Santos' gaze and even the memory of old Polonio from the tragedy of Hamlet briefly crossed his mind. From the radio you could hear the loud voice of a soldier speaking for the twentieth time from Government House. The strains of the anthem, followed by a military march, replaced the sad, melancholy helpless rrhythms of a milonga.

Maybe, just maybe, because you never know what is hidden in the minds of two men who are alone and surrounded by a multitude of silences, both wanted to talk about politics or current affairs in general. But they knew that politics no longer had anything to do with those moments, that that old whore who once satisfied the lubricious desires of the ancient Greeks, had already retired to a ruined house built with sarcasm and fallacies, where the windows have dark glass. and the only doors that don't have a key are false doors. There she rests, because she has not yet died, dreaming of the beautiful old days, longing for the golden age when blood stains only grew on the sheets after making love, and death was such a natural and serene act, even so strange, that the slight anguish of the mourners was sweetly healed with kisses and sex.

For this reason, neither of them said anything about the so-called current events, because what is real flows through the veins between the tiles of any house, business or temple in any city or town, and does not need translation. Every comment is superfluous rhetoric, a repetition that is mere charm to calm the cowardly spirits of other men more fearful than the two of them. Santos and Márquez knew what was in each other's eyes: only the fear that neither felt willing to recognize, and that is why silence was the most appropriate accomplice, and at the same time the shortest bond for the union of two souls.

Márquez finished eating, crossed the cutlery on the plate, took a last sip of wine and left the napkin on the tablecloth. Half of its contents still remained in the bottle.

-Everything has been very good, Gaspar.

-Thank you, can I bring you a coffee?

"No," he answered. "I'm going to take the opportunity to explore the city a little before it gets dark."

It was three thirty in the afternoon. He should have returned to the hotel in search of news, at least to accompany Mateo, but he didn't even feel like making a phone call. He needed to be alone to tour that city, as if contemplation were the exact and simultaneous translation of his complete and absolute thought. Him and the city. That was what he had sought when studying architecture, now he understood it so simply that he felt cheated by his own intelligence. It had been essential, apparently, to come in search of some stray dogs to finally understand it. But he was already outside, after paying his bill and saying goodbye to Santos with a handshake, while the ritual chords of the San Lorenzo march seemed to throw him out. Yes, he felt that way, saved at the last moment by a decree that seemed like a rotten fruit from the sick tree of mercy. Santos remained behind, locked in those four walls, his body submissive even though his mind was free, resigned, perhaps, to the peculiar taste for tragedy, battles and epics that that music spreads throughout the world.

He found himself in the middle of a sidewalk besieged by the sun, his conscience stunned by the cabernet and Santos's voice still percolating in his ears over the metallic waltz of ancient shrapnel. Slowly, the silence of the nap, only occupied by the engines of some cars, sleepy buses and the worn tires on the cobblestones, was cleaning those noises of distant brass, until his steps took him without realizing it, - hence the daze. momentary of his senses - to the vacant lot next to the closed barbershop. There were no fences, just an eighteen-inch-high wall, topped by mounds of earth and grass taller than itself. There were paths in the middle, almost certainly, some of that could be seen from the sidewalk. He climbed onto the low wall, and saw the blood stains on the wall of the business. It was a good hiding place, he had to admit, among the very high and thick grass, both for the murderers and for the dogs.

He decided to investigate. He was going to get his moccasins dirty, his hands hurt, and his suit torn by branches or thistles, but he didn't think too much about these little inconveniences. He felt more curiosity than apprehension, more need to see for himself what he had been told. Was it morbidity in search of satisfaction? There was something of that, but when he felt the beginning of an erection he tried to suppress it with all the vulgar shame of a teenager exposed to the gazes of others. But there was nothing but tall weeds hiding him from the street, and above it was nothing but the sky through which he traveled, from some radio or television in the neighborhood, the imperishable rhythm of a military march.

He stopped, wiped his forehead with his overcoat. He no longer took care not to get himself or his clothes dirty. He took a deep breath, adjusted his pants, and when he felt more in control of his person, he continued following the path toward the wall. He knew that he was not going to find the bodies of the boys that SantosHe had spoken, but he was not sure he would not find others. The smell of rot was more intense, and not only because of the garbage that the neighbors threw away. It was a bitter aroma, like fresh blood, mixed with the smell of wet hair. Then he encountered one of the blind dogs, which faced him decisively, growling at the void in which he had to sense with his sense of smell and his ears. In that void he, Walter Márquez, was for the first time in a state of defenselessness when it should have been the opposite. But a sighted person does not always have an advantage over a blind person, nor does size or intelligence survive certain factors that go beyond all logic. Instinct contains what is necessary to survive, and he knew that his own instinct was ossified, even vitiated, by the burden of a more insipid, more lame and sickly dream.

Faced with a single dog, he might have been able to defend himself, but another appeared from behind the bush. Then he heard the moans of many more hiding next to the wall and was certain that they were puppies. If those he now saw were the parents, they seemed ready to attack him to prevent him from getting closer. That's why he started to back away, slowly.

There was no point in staying still like on Saturday night, he had to get out of that wasteland because he knew that now he was in their territory. Turning your back or running was more than reckless. Walking backwards in that place made it possible to trip and leave his body free to attack, but he couldn't do anything else. He continued to retreat, and had already made quite a distance, feeling the uneven ground and touching the branches with his elbows. He hoped the dogs would not follow him, no matter how much they barked when he saw him go, but they continued to threaten him. He yelled for help a couple of times, but it was silly to expect anything at that nap time.

Then he tripped over a rock that he obviously didn't remember jumping over before, and fell backwards. He saw the animals coming at him. He tried to protect his face with the forearm where he was wearing his overcoat. The dogs' paws were on top of him, he felt their snouts searching for an entrance through the fabric, their teeth pulling at the clothing. They bit him not too hard, because they seemed obsessed with searching for his throat. Soon, Walter smelled his own blood, or perhaps it was the scent of fear and mud. He believed, for a moment, that he was completely and definitively finished, and it was this very idea that rebelled him, and he stood up suddenly. The dogs, which together did not exceed their own weight, fell on their sides. One of them continued biting the coat, and the other joined him. Walter pulled, while he thought about what to do. He no longer cared about the coat, but about entertaining them in this way while he tried to escape. When he felt the dogs using more force biting and pulling on the coat, he pulled his forearm away from him and ran away. He had seen, just a second before, the dogs fall back when he let go of the coat. But he was already on the path, and the dogs, even though they barked among the plants and branches, did not come out.

Walter sat on the threshold of the barbershop, took off his jacket with torn sleeves. His arms were bruised with deep puncture wounds that still didn't hurt too much. He lifted the cuffs of his pants, his legs were scratched but not seriously injured. His body was sweaty and his hands were shaking. There was no one on the street, as if the city were empty, besieged in a kind of timeless limbo. While the dogs were acting, the city was nothing but concrete and cobblestones.

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Farías handed him the paper. Ibáñez read it, but only to give his thoughts time to calm down.

-I'm not going to sign.

Ruiz and Farías moved away from Mateo Ibáñez a little and spoke for no more than two minutes. Mateo was absorbed in his pain. He had not expected him to disappear, but he had not believed that almost forty-eight hours later he would be as sharp as at the beginning, nor that his fright had grown to the limit of belief. Then, he said to himself, when I no longer believe in what I am now, when everything seems like a fantasy or a dream, I will be able to abandon myself to the tranquility of serene madness.

Ruiz approached him, and putting a hand on his shoulder, said:

-I told Farías about Valverde. He agrees, but maybe it's a waste of time. He must have gotten rid of those dogs by now.

Farías also approached him.

-I'm sorry, Dr. Ibáñez, but if we don't find anything, the body of his wife is invaluable for the investigation. Think that she would have wanted it that way.

Ruiz made a gesture that Farías did not understand, but which he insinuated that this way of speaking would only cause Mateo to become even more stubborn.

-What do you know...? –Ibáñez answered, facing Farías.

"Let's not fight, please," said the minister. "I didn't mean to offend." I just told himor that if you do not cooperate, the government is authorized to act even without your consent.

That only served to infuriate Ibáñez, who grabbed him by the lapels of his suit. A security man separated him, and while Farías fixed his jacket, Mateo hid his face in his hands, murmuring. Ruiz hugged him.

-Calm down, Mateo, you have to calm down because if not things are going to get worse.

-Could it be but for me?

Ruiz looked at Farías, who had heard him.

-I think so, Mateo. The new government... do you understand me?

Ibáñez shook his head, took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face.

-Let's go to Valverde's, then.

When they arrived at the pharmacy, it was eleven in the morning. There were people coming and going. The pharmacist wore his overalls, while he dispensed remedies or preparations. When he saw them enter, he barely

greeted them, as if he didn't know them. They waited for the last customer to leave and the minister closed the door.

-Good morning, Valverde.

-Hello, Mr. Minister...

-You already know my colleagues...

"I had the pleasure," he said, looking at them over his glasses, continuing to record the latest sales in his cash book.

-They told me that you have the bodies of some dogs that we are looking for.

Valverde took off his glasses and his clear eyes looked so beautiful in the middle of that old and dusty pharmacy, that for a moment the others stood observing if there was something more in that look than the plain simplicity of a country man. However, they already knew him, or at least sensed the strange personality of Gustavo Valverde.

-It is not true, Mr. Minister, the doctors must have gone to the wrong pharmacy.

Ibáñez reacted as Ruiz had expected. In complete silence, as if the anger was so much that he had even reserved for himself the energy that any word or sound would have required, he went towards the hallway that the night before he had walked more than once. The others followed him, as he opened the doors one after another. They saw the bathroom, the storage room, the laboratory. When they arrived at Valverde's bedroom, they found the dirty and smelly bed where the pharmacist's wife was sleeping. She opened her eyes for a moment and hid her hand under the covers, but they caught a glimpse of her naked, deformed flesh.

Ibáñez lowered his head, still with one hand on the door handle and his feet in the middle of a step that he would never finish taking.

"I'm sorry," he said to Rosa Valverde. Then he closed it and looked at the other three. The pharmacist's expression was recriminating and so sincere that for a moment he doubted whether it was the man who the night before had proposed using Alma's body for his experiments.

Ruiz grabbed Ibáñez gently by the arm and they went out into the street. Farías followed them, and said:

-He got rid of them, it was expected. We can't do anything to him because we were never able to prove anything to him.

-That's because they don't want to... said Ruiz.- It doesn't even have a title...

-Make a complaint and we will investigate it.

-I already did it. But a few days later the wife of one of the police officers from the station came to see me, who was pregnant. She didn't want to have the boy, I told her that she couldn't do anything. The next time she came to see me, she denied to me that she was ever pregnant. There are jobs that she charges, others that she does to pay.

Farías said that these were not times to rummage through the trash.

"There have always been those things," he added.

They got into the minister's car, taking the road back to the hospital.

-Is there no one to tell, Mateo? To Alma's family, or yours. So that they can take care of Blas, in the meantime – said Ruiz.

-We don't have close family, they are in the provinces, and it is not worth making them come. Blas is my responsibility, and I only entrust it to you while I take care of it...

-Take care of what? –He asked, seeing that Farias was looking at them in the rearview mirror.

-I already told you last night...-And Mateo said no more.

They arrived at the hospital. Ibáñez signed the consent and delivered it to Farías.

-Who is going to do the autopsy?

-It has not yet been decided, a coroner will be appointed tomorrow morning. Shall I meet you at the hotel?

"I have my car, minister, thank you," said Ruiz.

They got into the car to return to the hotel.

-What exactly were you referring to? – Bernardo wanted to know.

-I'm going to kill those dogs, one by one.

-But Mateo, we don't even know how to find them...

-They are going to find us, or perhaps how Alma died.

-And how do you plan to kill them?

Bernardo asked with a mocking half smile.

-Stop at a weapons deal.

-You're an idiot, excuse me for telling you, but you're behaving like a boy.

He looked at Mateo and he was looking at him with an expression very different from the sadness or anger that he had accustomed him to in the last two days. He continued drivinggoing in silence, until he heard Mateo order him:

-Stop here.

He stopped, and just realized that they were in front of an armory. He didn't have time to say anything. Mateo had already gotten off and was entering the business. Bernardo got out of the car and slammed the door. He entered angrily and approached where Mateo was talking to the seller.

"I'm not going to leave you..." he murmured in her ear. He grabbed Mateo's arm, but he resisted him without much effort. Ibáñez was stronger and taller than him, he couldn't do anything to stop him.

"I would like to see that rifle," Ibáñez said to the manager. Mateo looked over it, trying to look like an expert, and even he came out on top for a moment. But the seller noticed and asked:

-Do you have a license, sir?

Mateo looked at him without knowing what to say.

"I do have it," Ruiz intervened. He looked at Mateo: "I'm from the countryside," he said, thus returning Ibáñez's grateful look.

They left with the rifle wrapped in its case, left it in the back seat of the car and resumed the road to the hotel.

Upon arrival, Dergan told them that Márquez had not returned. Blas was having lunch with the cook.

-How was it with the minister?

They told him what had happened and Dergan looked sardonically at Mateo when he found out what he planned to do. He looked around, but Ansaldi had gone out to the hospital to see his nephew.

-What do you know about shooting, do you mean to tell me?

-Nothing, but this one can teach me.

Dergan started laughing, and while you were trying to stop, he started to say:

-But are you seriously thinking of learning in one day and bye dogs?

His French accent made the idioms sound strange and diminished the effect he was trying to give them.

-Then you teach him... -Ruiz told him- ...because he is going to get into a mess and kill someone...

"I would like that," said Mateo, "although I don't know where to start."

What was left of Dergan's laughter suddenly disappeared.

-Okay, I've been hunting with my parents since I was eight years old, so I know something about this, but realize that it's not going to be easy for an amateur.

-Come with me, then. I need Walter and Bernardo to take care of Blas and what happens at the hospital. We kill the dogs and leave.

-Does it seem that easy to you? With the soldiers on the roads, and Farias watching us?

-It is not a crime to kill dogs, as far as I know.

-But they do shoot weapons without authorization from the bosses.

Mateo shrugged his shoulders, as if it didn't matter too much to him. Mauricio then said that he had brought his rifle with him.

"I brought it just in case," he added. Since these are wild dogs, I didn't think it was unnecessary to be cautious.

Bernardo looked at Dergan knowingly. Whatever had united and separated them in their town had been appeased in that truce established only by that look.

-I know an area on the outskirts of the city, it is half hidden behind some trees, far from the road. We can practice all afternoon.

Ibáñez agreed, went upstairs to put his son to bed for a nap and changed his clothes. He came down wearing jeans and a white T-shirt, boots and a jacket.

Dergan and Ruiz couldn't help but laugh.

-We are not going to Africa, Mateo.

He now had naivety in his eyes.

-Well, it occurred to me that it could be useful, they gave it to me years ago, but I never used it...

They both patted him on the back. Bernardo promised to take care of Blas until they returned.

-Please be careful. If they catch them with weapons and without licenses, at least Mateo...

"Don't worry," Dergan said, because Ibáñez was already leaving for the car. –I'm in charge of keeping him in line... – he winked at him and ruffled Bernardo's short curls. Then he got into his Rural and they drove off.

They walked through many streets that all seemed the same to Mateo. Monday afternoons were only a little busier than weekend afternoons, even becoming more similar as they moved further from the center. The low houses became more spaced out, with vacant lots and trees invading the wide sidewalks. There were kids on bicycles, a wellman's truck, and several patrol cars and gendarmes stationed from time to time. They were reaching the limits of the city, and the countryside opened up on both sides of the road. Dergan rolled down the window and turned on the radio. The news reported many incidents in Buenos Aires and Córdoba.

"Strange that nothing happens here," he commented.

-Strange, yes. Everything seems so calm in the city. Except the dogs...it seems...

Mauricio waited for him to continue.

-…that?

-I don't know, it's a feeling, my imagination, nothing more. But it's as if the dogs are in charge of keeping the peace, I don't know how I make myself understood? Peace during the day, while at night they make war.

Ibáñez is delirious, Mauricio told himself. He didn't know whether to turn around and go back, but what he was sure of was that he was never going toconvince him. The only option was to leave him alone, abandon him to those ghosts that were growing in Mateo's mind. Even he was able, if he tried hard, to see them circling inside the narrow space of the car, hiding from the cruel afternoon light, causing intermittence in the radio transmission. But that was all pure imagination, he thought. The reality was what was outside, the empty field, the empty route, and the gendarmes becoming less and less frequent, like signaling pylons that disappeared as the field relieved them of their duties. Loneliness and nothingness are sometimes stronger than fire and metal.

They hadn't seen anyone for half an hour, just some cars passing by heading towards the city.

"It's over there," Mauricio said, pointing to some trees to the right.

Mateo saw a small eucalyptus forest. Dergan turned down a dirt path that he hadn't even seen before leaving the road. Birds pecking at the ground took flight as the car passed toward the trees. Only then did Mateo see an old building in ruins, hidden until then by the grassland. Behind, the trees formed a small park with cement tables and benches, broken and with exposed steel wires, covered in mold and bird droppings. They were arranged in a semicircle, whose concavity looked towards a series of grills in

the same state. A little further to the right, there were sinks without taps, only a rusty water pump next to them.

They got out of the car, and Mateo began to walk, listening to the chirping of the birds that came from the highest branches, perceiving the aroma of the eucalyptus trees, stepping on the seeds and the mattress of long, thin, brown or dark green leaves. Dergan spoke to him, meanwhile, telling him that he came there when he was a newcomer to the country, that that restaurant and grill still operated, and travelers stopped at all hours to eat, the boys played among the trees, collecting leaves and seeds, and the dogs that got out of the cars ran like crazy.

-I barely spoke Spanish when I arrived, but the owner of the place had been my father's neighbor in Perros-Guirec... Yes, that's my town... -he told Mateo, anticipating what he was going to say-...So he taught me in the afternoons, at nap time, while I was training in mate, too. I paid him by taking care of his animals, some dogs, a horse. He also raised chickens and ducks, because before, where that ditch is, do you see it?, there was a little puddle of water where they dared to splash around. When the road was paved, people began to pass it by, because the travel time became shorter and they no longer needed to stop to rest. Don Gervaise, that's his name, sold the place, I mean he undersold it, because the government bought it from him during Perón's time. It must still remain state owned, I suppose. Until a few years ago, I came here every other Sunday to practice shooting.

Dergan pointed to some fallen cans on the grills.

-Do you see there? They are the same ones that I left I don't know how long ago. Wait, I'm going to look for some bottles.

He squeezed through an opening between the boarded up doors of the old building, and came out with a crate, followed by several cats who ran out.

-Look what I found -and he showed Mateo a wooden box with six bottles of beer.

-It must be rancider than shit...

Mauricio made fun of that naive exit.

-But if we are not going to take it, they are for you to practice.

He went to the car to get the weapons from the trunk, his and Mateo's, which he had taken out of Ruiz's car before leaving the hotel. Then he carried the bottles to the grill, threw down the old cans, and placed them in a row. He returned to Ibáñez and began showing him the parts of the rifle, urging him to become familiar with its weight and the shape of it. Then he told him how to seat the stock firmly on his shoulder so as not to fall backwards when firing.

When Mateo felt ready, Mauricio told him to shoot. Ibáñez did so, and fell flat on the floor. The bottles had not been touched, but some birds came out scared. Dergan was laughing, Mateo was serious and embarrassed. He helped him up. The first time is always like this, he comforted him. But Mateo did not want to be consoled, he was tired of the looks of pity and the words of condolence. He needed the silence of the word and longed for the stridency of confusion. He stood at attention again, aimed at the grill, and fired again before Dergan signaled. This time he didn't fall on his back, but the bottles were still unscathed.

He reloaded the rifle and took aim.

"Calm down, calm down..." Mauricio told him, although he knew it was useless.

The third shot broke the last bottle on the right. Mateo raised his arms and shouted with joy, jumping, and Mauricio congratulated him.

-But what a lucky so n of a bitch!

Mateo abrace.

-Let's keep practicing, come on...

The bottles soon disappeared and they went to look for more crates of empty or full bottles. Inside the building the smell of cat urine was unbearable, like the smell of perspiration and dirty hair. Outside, the smell of old beer filled the place, but the aroma of the eucalyptus trees turned that mist into a strange aroma, sweet and bitter at the same time. Dergan also practiced, while he continued to advise Mateo many things that he had learned through experience. Now Ibáñez hit practically all his shots.

-But the dogs are going to be running...

-You're right, I'm going to look for cans and throw them into the air.

He collected the old cans and put them in a bag. One by one, he threw them into the distance and Mateo shot them. Mastering this would take Ibáñez a couple more hours. It was six o'clock in the afternoon. The car radio was still on, the news came on without interruption, except when the music program came on.

Mateo fired one last shot, and heard the soprano's voice. It was a dark and sad voice, born from the speakers to grow in the open space between the trees. It was Moussorgsky's third song. The song that speaks of the old and tired peasant, to whom death comes to give him his well-deserved rest, to interrupt the servitude of work and the slavery of life. The voice was loud, but the volume was not high, if just a while before the news was barely heard. Now there was not even intermittency, and only the sound of gunshots interrupted the continuous flow of voice and melody. Both were a

single substance, not sound, but an aroma that was slowly taking the shape of that small forest, and the shape of the abandoned building.

He looked at Mauricio, but he didn't seem to be paying attention. From the building came a smell stronger than that of cats. It was a smell he lived with almost every day. The smell of the dead is unmistakable. When he stopped shooting, he realized that the silence was a pit wider and deeper than he had ever imagined, and his feet were right on the edge of that void. He had dizziness, maybe it was the smell of stale beer, or not having had lunch that day. Dergan had also stopped shooting, and they were both now looking toward the building.

The smell became so intense that they had to hold their tissues to their noses. A strong breeze had arisen at the end of the afternoon, and it pushed and dragged like bags of air, that smell of rot, that smell that more than any other stimulates the other senses with irritating effectiveness: the sight of a body, the taste of blood, the coldness of the skin and the silence of death.

19

The late afternoon was shrouded by a cloudy sky and increasingly colder air as it grew darker. The branches of the trees swayed violently.

Both had sat on the hood of the rural car, their weapons leaning on the door. Dergan was chewing on a green stalk, his elbows resting on his knees. Ibáñez chewing a piece of gum that he had found in the glove compartment. Surely the thoughts of each one were very different, but their gazes, no matter how much they tried to pretend to divert their direction towards the field or the road, were absorbed by that smell that came from the ruined restaurant. As if the eyes wanted to see the invisible traces of another form of sensitivity, that of smell. But the senses, as parallel and completely separate dimensions, cannot understand their immediate neighbor; only a greater organizing power is capable of uniting them all in the same meaning. At times like this, where reason doubts and curiosity takes the immediate form of obsession, a man tends to behave as separate entities, and what one finds reasonable, the other finds dangerous. That is why fear alternates with the irrefutable logic of common sense. Sometimes they confuse and balance the scores, other times they try to dominate the actions of every human being who believes themselves exempt from those internal fights, simply because they do not make noise.

And they were that kind of men. Head down at times, lonely at other times, desperate for company on rare occasions. But above all men who acted in the vertigo of a life that led them without realizing it to that place,

that place in the middle of the field, next to a grove of eucalyptus trees, surrounded by the fresh and threatening wind of an upcoming stormy night, which It brought the aroma of fresh grass and covered the roof of the car with leaves. Until they told themselves, inwardly, that they had to go in.

There was nothing on the road, only the occasional low beam of a truck. No one around for many miles around. Completely alone. Without witnesses for what they could see or do in the next few minutes. A freedom that to a certain extent exalted them the same thing that was making them the fear, the fear that that smell caused them.

Mauricio took a flashlight from the car, handed it to Mateo, and brought his loaded gun. They walked towards the opening through which they had entered several times. Now the interior was not so dark, the light, like the density of the air, seemed to have balanced between the exterior and the interior. They passed between crates and stacks of bottles. It was a place they had already seen, but without noticing that smell before. Even now it was less intense than a while ago, as if it had only increased in the middle of the afternoon after several hours of sun and heat. A smell faded, settled like a leaf caught in a whirlpool that is dying. They followed his trail, among the remains of tables and chairs, until they reached the wide counter where Dergan remembered having leaned on so many times many years before. But there was no longer the figure of Don Gervaise, but a column of darkness sculpted in front of the shelves on the wall. Some rats ran to hide from the intruders. They continued on their way to the warehouse. There was a closed door, they pushed it because it was stuck, perhaps swollen from the humidity of so many years.

It was the kitchen, and it had all kinds of utensils, rusty pots, sinks full of dirt, broken dishes. It's a good thing they were wearing boots, they said to each other, because they were stepping on glass and pieces of metal. At the back, there was another door. That should have been the deposit. It was open, so they just crossed the threshold and found a staircase that descended

Dergan was ahead, with his weapon ready, Mateo followed him, illuminating the beam of the flashlight that preceded them both. They doubted that the ladder was strong enough to support their weight, but the smell was also more concentrated and they could no longer back down. The rats continued to scatter in their path, but they were not afraid of them. They heard fluttering on the ceiling, probably bats. They reached the end of the stairs. Mateo missed a step and bumped into Dergan. He asked for forgiveness, and Mauricio should have said something to him, but he spoke so quietly that he couldn't understand him. He only saw him extend an arm towards the far wall. He shined his light there. There were burlap bags, fabrics that looked damp, drums filled with some liquid, maybe kerosene or gasoline. That was not the important thing, because even though the smell of fuel was intense, the sweet aroma of the corpses was much more evident. They both knew him from experience. It was an aroma to which

they were accustomed, they even stopped noticing it for several hours during their work.

That is why they were not too surprised when, upon lifting up those fabrics that seemed damp, but that simply shone in the beam of the flashlight due to their wear and age, due to the stiffness produced by the humidity of years, they were not scared when they saw the bodies in different states of decomposition. They were all dressed in street clothes, shirts, sweaters, shoes or sneakers, one had a scarf and another was still wearing gloves. They were all men, or maybe there was a woman underneath. Because they were not in a row but piled up. The faces were almost unrecognizable, the skin wrinkled and stuck to the bones, the hair dry and hard, the hands broken and in strange positions, as if they had been tied until after death.

Mateo dropped the cloths again and illuminated Dergan's face. She was pale, and his throat moved as if he were swallowing saliva. His eyes were shining. He grabbed his arm, helping him not to trip on the stairs, they passed through the kitchen and the dining room. Once outside, night had already fallen, but it was not completely dark. There was a bluish tint over the field, and the lights of a truck were a hope, a relief that they never thought they could feel when seeing a simple transport truck. Perhaps because it represented the everyday reality that they could understand and master, and not what they had just left behind, what had made them feel lost like children in the middle of an infinite and unfathomable darkness.

Later, perhaps months after all this was over, when Ibáñez remembered what they saw that afternoon, he would explain to himself or to whoever would listen, that that place had once been a clandestine detention center, that even while Mauricio was practicing with his gun in the early days after the restaurant closed, the bodies were already there. Perhaps, when he left his practice and returned to town, he probably crossed paths with another car coming in the opposite direction that had just arrived. And if he had stopped for a single moment in the middle of the road, he could, perhaps, have heard something similar to distant gunshots. But Mauricio would never know that for sure, just as Mateo Ibáñez did not know how he could survive that week he spent in La Plata. Only by forgetting would he be able to explain it to her, or more precisely by ignoring the desperate cries of memory.

twenty Walter entered the hotel at four thirty in the afternoon. He came with his arms wrapped in his suit jacket, his pants half rolled up, his face scratched and sweaty. His loose tie fell in front of his vest, with broken buttons. When he entered the empty hallway, he plopped down on the

couch. No one saw him enter, and ten minutes passed until Ruiz, coming down from his room, saw a head peeking over the backrest.

"Walter," he said. As he walked around the couch, his voice broke for an instant with a tone of concern.

-My God, what happened to you!

-What do you imagine? –Walter said.

-Those sons of bitches, but where did they attack you?

-In a vacant lot, next to the barbershop.

Ruiz tried to check his arms, but Walter resisted.

-Careful, please...

He managed to remove the cloth stuck by dried blood. They were not extensive wounds but they were deep. The holes in his fangs were clear and almost neat. He should be grateful that they hadn't torn him apart, Ruiz thought.

-Why didn't you go to the hospital? You would have called me to go look for you.

-It was only ten blocks away, but they seemed longer than I thought.

-So let's go now...

-There's nothing to sew, right?

-No but...

-Then cure me and give me the necessary vaccines, then I'm going to go to bed.

-This is a hotel, damn it, not a hospital, I don't carry that with me, not even in my briefcase.

-But we can't leave Blas alone with Ansaldi...

-I already know it. But he arrived a while ago with the boy... I go for a quick drive to the office and back. Ansaldi!

The janitor left his room. He had a sleepy look.

-They attacked Márquez, please take care of him while I go to get the vaccines from my office. The boy sleeps in his room, don't wake him up.

-It's not my intention, doctor. Don't worry, I'll take care of the architect.

Ruiz left and they were alone. Ansaldi did not make a move to cover or heal Márquez's wounds. Walter looked at him from the sofa, suspicious, and

suddenly Ansaldi's figure, small, half-stooped, with narrow shoulders, with that face that was somewhere between young and old at the same time, reminded him of the shape of a bird. Ansaldi was standing in front of him, his hands clasped in front of his chest, his head half bald and with a crown of short blonde-white hair. He wondered how old he really was. He looked fifty, but sometimes his voice on the phone sounded much younger, and then, denying that impression, his face seemed to show hidden wrinkles and skin that was too smooth and worn. Other times he looked like he was ninety years old, but it was impossible, Walter told himself, seeing him now as if he were seeing a strange phenomenon that he couldn't be sure was not just a hallucination. He believed until he saw him wearing a frock coat, 19th century pants and a ruffled shirt. But Walter was feverish, that was the only thing he felt sure of. He was sweating, and the blood in his wounds seemed to liquefy to let the hemorrhage flow again. He looked at himself, but he wasn't bleeding, and for a while he calmed down.

-Do you want to drink something, architect?

Walter looked up and shook his head. Immediately he wanted to say that yes, he needed a glass of water, but his palate was dry and his tongue was stuck without being able to say anything. Ansaldi didn't even see his gesture, because he had already turned around to return to his room. He heard barking and was startled. But they were ordinary dogs that ran after a cyclist.

He fell asleep. When he woke up, he was still on the couch. Ruiz was next to him, giving him an injection in his arm. He had taken off her shirt, and was dressing her wounds with iodine. Then he bandaged him and gave him a pill to take. Walter drank the glass of water very thirstily, and asked for another, and then another. When he felt satisfied, he asked:

-And Mateo...?

Ruiz looked at the time. It was six o'clock in the afternoon. They would have to be back by now, they didn't have much more daylight time to practice.

-He went crazy, he bought a gun to kill the dogs...

Walter started laughing. There was not the slightest intention of mockery. The laugh was short and took on the sad tone of a hollow sound.

-Let's go to bed, you have to sleep so that your fever goes away.

He helped him get up and go up to the room. He dropped it on the bed and turned off the light on his way out. In the next room was Blas, he heard noises and went to see him. The boy was knocking on the door. He opened it and Blas hugged his leg, crying. Bernardo picked him up in his arms and tried to console him.

-My God, what are we doing to you. You should be with someone who takes good care of you.

He went down with the boy to entertain him while he waited for the others to arrive. He sat on the same old couch, looking at the entrance. Blaise rested her head on his chest and began to play with a gold chain. He pulled the hair on his chest and Bernardo held back a brief bitch. He pushed her hands away, smiling at her. He thought of his wife's pregnancy. Natalia must have been sitting on the porch of the room at that moment, having a mate with fried cakes that she prepared so deliciously. She wondered if her son, or daughter, would be like her parents. She would undoubtedly carry in her womb the same thing as the two of them, the germ of a condition, of a habitat to be populated by insects. She then saw that Gregorio Ansaldi was next to her, offering her a cup of tea.

-Doctor, if you feel like...?

That tone again, Ruiz thought. He was the only one with whom she still had that deceptive condescension. He accepted the cup and placed it on the small table next to the sofa. He looked for a moment at the porcelain cup: a crack ran through the middle. He took a sip, and as he set it down, he noticed another similar crack in the plate. By chance, they coincided. It was fine porcelain, he thought, and Ansaldi preempted his question:

-I see that you appreciate beauty, doctor. It is really a relief to find such sensitivity in a scientist. This set is the little that remains of a hundred-four-piece tableware that I brought from my homeland many years ago. Only twelve out of one hundred and four. It's been like watching an entire city die, doctor, a city where everyone was close family.

-I'm sorry, Ansaldi. And what date is it from...

-It was a gift from Prince Christian of Saxony to me... to an ancestor.

Ruiz noticed this slip, as if the memory of those times had weakened for an instant the barrier of equivocal appearance with which he was trying to protect himself. But to protect himself from what, he wondered.

-What do you know about dogs?

-The same as everyone....

Ruiz made a gesture of impatience.

-Do not insult my intelligence, Ansaldi. You are hiding something, you are not going to deny it to me.

-Now it is you who offends me by forcing me to repeat trite phrases. We are all hiding something, doctor. You know it... -And he extended a hand to touch Ruiz's chest.

Bernardo let that hand, which was barely touching him, slide with timid stealth to the pit of his stomach. There he stopped, and he felt the usual tingling when something made him feel bad, or at least uncomfortable. Ansaldi had that virtue, of course, but there was something more. He felt that the insects, asleep or silent, as they would be for most of his life until the moment when he had to die to expel them, were moving as if dispersing. He stifled an intense spasm and pushed the old man's hand away.

-I'm sorry, doctor, but it was the only way to verify my truthfulness.

Ruiz was recovering when he saw him grab Blas and sit him next to him on the couch. The boy looked at the old man with suspicion, but he did not resist. He only noticed that his forehead was sweating and he was wiping his lips frequently. He wondered if he had a fever, but he was on the other side of Ansaldi, and he didn't feel up to it.

-Who are you? “He,” he asked her.

The old man smiled at him, settling himself better and putting the boy on his knees, as if ready to tell him a story.

-I'm Gregorio Ansaldi, and my father's name was the same as me. My mother was Marietta Sottocorno, a fortune teller. I am the product of both, the result of invention and prophecy. My father lived many years, and he was almost a hundred when he married my mother, who was a teenager. He prolonged his life with a mixture of substances that he found on his travels through these regions of South America, when there were still indigenous people who preserved the secrets of his alchemy. He was almost successful in combating death, and made me live almost as long as he did. Two generations when there should have been at least three. That is a very commendable advance for humanity.

Ruiz listened to him but he didn't entirely know if he was really understanding what he was telling him.

-How old are you?

-Enough, doctor, for whom he has fought with death and its messengers, whose family you have entered.

He began to caress Blas's head, who was playing with the end of a handkerchief that was sticking out of Ansaldi's pocket.

-I can cure it, doctor. I think I have a good chance of doing it, if you'll allow me.

Bernardo sat up straight in his seat and looked at him with pale cheeks and shiny eyes.

-As? Tell me please.

-Patience, doctor, follow the advice you give to your patients. Every treatment requires some sacrifice. It's not much that I ask of you.

-What, for God's sake, say it already?!

-I know that Dr. Ibáñez has decided to kill the dogs. He won't be able to do it with everyone, but I don't want him to kill more than those who already died on Saturday. They are my hope. I don't have children, the opportunity wasn't given, I guess. That's why Valverde is like my adopted son. He has the same concerns as me, the same objective. Delaying death is the most important step, and dogs are part of our experiences. They must live and reproduce, because only with the years will we see if our goal has been achieved. I will die sooner or later, so will Valverde, but the dogs will continue to live.

-And what do you expect me to do?

-That he convinces Ibáñez to leave the city, or at least prevents him from killing the animals.

Ruiz got up from the couch and pulled Blas away from Ansaldi.

-Even if I accept what he asks of me, I'm not going to convince him, you don't know him.

-I imagine it, but it is in his hands to do everything necessary, if he wants to free himself from his legacy.

When the old man got up and walked past him to return to the room, Ruiz once again felt the tingling in his abdomen. Blas was telling him that he was hungry. He looked at the boy, and answered that he was going to give him the snack. He went to the dining room and sat him in the high chair. He touched his forehead and luckily he didn't seem to have a fever. He entered the kitchen, where the manager was cleaning the floor.

-Hasn't the cook arrived yet?

-I don't know, doctor, I don't think I'll arrive at this time.

"Shitty hotel," Ruiz muttered, and he went directly to the refrigerator to look for milk to boil. He turned on the stove, put the jug of milk on the fire, looked for cans with cookies or vanilla. He returned to the dining room and Blas looked at him with a smile.

-Here you have, a vanilla for you and another for me.

Blas laughed at the crumbs that fell on the tablecloth, Bernardo tried to follow that smile, to become infected with Blas's innocence, the wise ignorance that was knowledge beyond the immediate. A knowledge of the only important thing worth worrying about: the end. That was what they, the adults, did not know, what made them shudder like old men forced to spend

a long night in the darkness and cold of winter. When we finally know our body like we know the engine of our car, we know what things it can tolerate, what roads, what climates and how many kilometers it can travel. We know when to fill the gas tank because the needle on the dashboard rotates in a certain way, if it needs water because it makes a slight gurgling sound, if we will need to add oil because it does not slide as usual.

We fear for our car as we fear for our body, both will take us, both will leave us stuck in an isolated place, and abandoned, perhaps forever, far from all communication, in absolute silence, a disembodied silence where not even the echoes of the wind They exist because there are no trees or rocks. Only the earth, pious, that rocks us, accepts us. And our car is to the coffin of our body, just as the body is to the coffin of our soul.

Ruiz knew that his body would not resist, and that is why the release that Ansaldi was offering him was more than a hope, and although his words had not included any type of promise, he was adding it to the old man's voice, imagining what I hadn't really listened, simply because I needed to prop up despair on a flimsy column of invented certainty.

Almost at ten, Mateo and Mauricio arrived. They were sweaty, and they left the rifles next to the fireplace, wrapped in sheets so that no one would see them when we got out of the car.

-How was your day, Bernardo? –Matthew asked, yawning.

Ruiz thought: he looks tired, maybe he doesn't want to go out tonight.

-A bad day... -and he began to tell about Márquez.

Mauricio was going up the stairs to take a shower in his room and stopped when he heard that. Now they both looked at him worried.

-Is Blas okay?

-Yes, don't worry, he's in your room sleeping.

"The whore who gave birth to him," said Mateo, running to the stairs.

The three entered Walter's room and found him asleep. Ruiz changed the damp cloth on his forehead. He put the thermometer in her armpit and took her pulse.

-Are you sure he's not ready to go to the hospital?

-He didn't want to, and I couldn't take him without leaving Blaise alone with the old man.

-But...-Dergan began to say.

Ruiz made him lower his voice and looked at the column of mercury on the thermometer.

-He no longer has a fever. Let's let him sleep. Lets go down. You have to tell me how it went for you.

Sandwiches, canned food and wine were served in the dining room. They told him about the practice, but were not willing to say anything about what they had seen in the restaurant. They changed the subject.

-This hotel is collapsing, and the old man no longer gives a damn...-said Mauricio.

-Or rather it's us who doesn't care about us, now that we know him better.

Dergan looked at Ruiz, intrigued.

-You spoke with him?

-More or less...

-Did he tell you who he is?

Ibáñez looked at them without understanding.

-Stop a little, like who is he?

They didn't pay attention to him. Mauricio and Bernardo once again shared that complicity from which he was isolated.

-He told me about his parents, he told me a whole delirium about postponing death, something similar to what Valverde told us, but in the old man all this sounds like a legend, like something. or too archaic to be true.

-But that is why he needs Valverde. The pharmacist makes it fit reality, you understand?

"I don't understand what they're talking about," Mateo intervened.

-On Sunday I checked the room, and found documents from the old man. He is over ninety years old and looks fifty.

"That was what he gave me to understand," Ruiz continued. "His father managed to prolong his life, and now Ansaldi wants to continue that by experimenting with dogs." He paused, took a deep breath because he knew that what he was going to say next was not I would encounter more than resistance.- That is commendable.

The others looked at him like a weirdo.

-What do you mean?

-I say it is a huge discovery if it were true. Maybe we should support them with the dog thing.

Mateo remembered Valverde's words in the sick woman's room. Yes, all that was true, at least the imagination and delirium were more palpable and truer than many supposedly concrete truths. Sometimes what we want to think about is self-evident, something as real as a life preserver in a shipwreck. Perhaps Valverde lived that way, or perhaps it was he, Ibáñez, who was not prepared to accept all that as true. Whatever it was, Ruiz's words, his change of attitude, confused him.

Dergan laughed, moving a finger over his temple as if turning a loose screw.

"It seems to me that he is being serious," said Mateo, seeing the expression of a scared boy that Bernardo had.

-Yes I'm serious. I think we should leave the dogs alone.

Mateo got up and went to look for his gun. Ruiz continued telling him.

-Think about it a little, if there is the slightest hope that this whole theory is true, Alma's death will not have been in vain... -While he spoke to him, Ibáñez reloaded his rifle and gave him looks of resentment.

-Okay...I give up...-said Ruiz- But at least don't go out tonight, think about it and tomorrow you will be more rested and calm.

Dergan stood up and went to get his gun.

"It seems to me that the old man brainwashed him... Don't pay attention to him," he told Mateo.

-I'm trying...-and Mateo looked at Ruiz with fury.

Bernardo insisted again.

-Think a little, a ninety-year-old man who looks fifty. Isn't it worth investigating? The dogs are part of the experiment, Valverde already said it.

They didn't pay attention to him, so he tried to stop Ibáñez with one arm, and he turned around and pushed him. Ruiz fell on his back, but no one tried to help him up. They saw him do it alone. Mateo looked at him with intense anger, the rifle trembling in his hands, the barrel crossing the front of his face like a crack in his soul.

"You're a son of a bitch," he said, resting the index finger of his right hand on Ruiz's chest, hitting him gently but with enough force to make him stagger. "You better take care of my son, because otherwise I swear that I kill you.

Mauricio pushed Mateo to get them out at once. Bernardo Ruiz saw them leave, and he knew that he had not done enough, that he would never have the courage to ever do what needed to be done.

twenty-one

It was after twelve at night. They carried their rifles covered and on their shoulders like bundles of cloth, in case they encountered people or a police officer. They walked several blocks, including the same ones where they had seen the dogs on Saturday night. The sky was starry, but the city lights dimmed the glow. They heard an ambulance siren and then a fire truck, far, far away from there. They heard barking and howling responding to those sirens. The smell of the night city had a faint mix of coffee, anise, and humidity. Some bars were open.

There was no one in the streets. Only the occasional car, or a cyclist who didn't even look at them. They passed in front of María Cortéz's house. Dergan felt a brief shiver as he remembered the Sunday morning he spent with her. There were dogs in the garden, but ordinary ones. They barked at him as they passed by the fence. A light came on on the porch and the window curtain moved a little.

They arrived at Costa's warehouse. It was as always, closed and abandoned. They banged on the metal door and windows, maybe there was somewhere where the wild dogs could get in. They didn't hear anything. They continued on. Now they were on the sidewalk of the vacant lot where Walter had been attacked.

"I'll go in first, you cover me," Mauricio said.

Mateo nodded and followed him. Dergan went into the grass, lighting himself with a flashlight. They had unwrapped their weapons. A dog barked and only a second later Mauricio felt the teeth on his left knee. He almost fell, but he regained his balance and hit the animal's head with the flashlight. The light went out, along with the darkness they heard the growls of another dog. Mateo clumsily searched for his u flashlight, which had become tangled in the sheet. When he managed to turn it on, they saw two animals in front of them.

"Don't move," Mauricio said. "Raise the rifle very slowly..." His voice became soft like a murmur.

Mateo tried to obey. He felt too tired to be afraid. To him now the dogs were nothing more than two objects to shoot down, and he was convinced that with a couple of quick movements he could shoot them with ease. But

Mauricio insisted on acting cautiously, even when the dogs couldn't even see them. His eyes, with half-closed lids, looked lost and almost ethereal in the white faces. The heads moved guided by smell. White mucus oozed from their snouts. Their mouths were open, and Mateo saw the large fangs, perhaps too large for the size of the dogs. They had not noticed that in the bodies in Valverde's laboratory. Would they have changed, would they be evolving in some way, with each generation? Because without a doubt these dogs were younger. And further back, next to the wasteland wall, there were babies.

While he was thinking about all this, Mateo saw that Dergan had already brought the rifle to his shoulder and was taking aim. The shot. One of the animals fell dead, the other ran to hide. They followed him.

"Slowly," Mauricio repeated.

They cleared branches and tall grass with the barrels of their rifles. They illuminated the path with their flashlights, until the white wall appeared, giving them a blinding reflection. They did not see the surviving dog approaching again. Mateo felt the animal's head on his face. Then he heard a shot, and still blind between the sudden brightness and the immediate darkness, he believed it was he who was wounded. But soon Dergan's hand helped him up. The dog was lying on the ground.

"Thank you," he said. Then he wondered if Mauricio had shot him just when he had the dog on him. The other guessed what he thought. The paleness on Mateo's face was so evident that Dergan began to laugh.

-I had no other alternative...

Ibáñez didn't say anything. They approached the babies. There were maybe fifteen or more.

-My God, if they reproduce like this, we won't finish anymore.

Mauricio only responded by raising the butt of the rifle and hitting the heads of some puppies.

"Take care of the others," he said to Mateo.

Ibáñez did what he asked. Five minutes later they were all dead. Only one moved a little, and Mateo finished him off with another blow. They left the wasteland, tired but enthusiastic, holding each other's shoulders and with their weapons in their free arms. Dergan was limping a little and bandaged himself with a piece of sheet.

-Do you want to go back to the hotel? –Matthew asked him.

-No way, now that we get the taste for it. Let's keep going.

When walking, Mauricio improved his pace. It was a superficial wound, and it didn't hurt him too much. They passed in front of the Casas bakery, then looked into the closed interior of Santos's bar. There was garbage and food leftovers at the door. They decided to wait a little, hiding, to see if the dogs would appear. When they turned the corner, they met two boys, about eighteen years old. They were twins. Both couples were surprised at each other first, then greeted each other.

-Hunting too, guys? –asked Dergan, who had seen the elastic waves and the stones accumulated on the sidewalk.

-That's right, sir.

Dergan tried to hide his contemptuous smile. The boys looked at the rifles with amazement and admiration.

-They were lucky?

One of them answered:

-We have already killed twenty dogs since they appeared, and two tonight.

Mauricio looked at them with sarcasm, but realized that they were not lying. Those stones, thrown with force in a vulnerable place, could be fatal.

-But where are they pointing them? –Matthew asked.

-By the way, sir. Anyone knows that.

Mauricio and Mateo started laughing, and the boys told them to be quiet.

-Well, boys, you have taught us a nice lesson. I am Dr. Ibáñez, and he is a veterinarian, Mauricio Dergan.

-We are the Benítez brothers. I am Daniel, this is Jorge.

The four of them shook hands. Then they sat on their haunches, waiting.

-They live nearby?

-Two blocks away.

-And do they go hunting every night?

-Some of them yes, some of them not.

-And you are not afraid?

-At first a little, but we already know them. They are blind, that limits them a lot from pursuing us. The smell confuses them too.

-The human smell?

-Yes doctor. My brother and I split up running, then the dogs chase one, and the other shoots him in the legs, so we take the opportunity to hit him in the nose with the waves.

-But if there are several...

-Once we dared to attack two at the same time, but they almost bit us. That's why we don't do anything if there are more than one. Now with you we can make a good team.

Mauricio patted the boy's back. The brother seemed more shy and spoke little.

Almost an hour later, four dogs appeared to sniff through the trash.

-One for each one –said Daniel Benítez.

"It's not going to be that easy," Dergan commented, peering over the edge of the wall. He signaled to Ibáñez to follow him, the boys followed him, but he told them to stay still, that he would let them know if he needed them. They protested in low voices.

Two of the dogs had climbed onto the pile of stacked bags, the other two were tearing at the ones underneath. As they seemed distracted, Mateo and Mauricio got close enough to shoot without error. But then a fifth dog appeared crossing the street and running straight towards Mateo. Neither of them saw it, they only realized when the dog fell half a meter from both of them, just when he was about to jump on Ibáñez. The animal was injured by a stone that the boys had thrown at it. Dergan shot him to finish him off. Now the boys were running towards them, exultant, but there was no time to say anything because the boys were pointing behind them. The other four dogs were now alert and approaching.

-Let's separate! –Said one of the twins, going down to the street to see if he could threaten the dogs from that side.

-Matthew, to my right! –Mauricio said.

Ibáñez obeyed, but he didn't understand what she expected him to do from there, there was nothing but the wall and the window of the bar. Dergan challenged the dogs with shouts and movements of the rifle. He knew that the smell of his wounded knee attracted them more to him than to the others. The other boy was close to him, behind and to the left, with the wave ready. The dogs that were on top of the bags came down, so Mauricio signaled to the boy to shoot. The stone hit one of the dogs in the head, and the other boy shot another in the haunches. The two fell to the ground, and Dergan shot them before they got up. The two remaining dogs had been cornered between the wall and the bags, Mateo was in charge of keeping them there. But when they heard the shots they went crazy and ran everywhere, hitting the wall and rolling in the trash. Ibáñez wanted to hit

them but he didn't have enough aim to hit them while they were moving, so Dergan took care of them.

One of the twins had climbed onto the pile of bags and fired a stone, at the wrong time, breaking one of the bar's windows. Santos then appeared, looking at the broken pieces, scratching his head with one hand and the other on his waist.

"Good evening, gentlemen..." he said, calm, resigned.

"Sorry..." Mateo began to say.

-Don't apologize, I've been trying to get rid of those shitty dogs for a long time, but they always come back.

The twins came over to apologize. He gave them a friendly tap on the chest.

-Don't worry, guys... I'm just going to have to tell your old man, this window is going to cost me a lot.

The boys looked at each other.

-Saints, please don't tell him anything, we'll pay for it, you know our old man is in a bad way.

-It is OK will talk tomorrow. Go home.

They said goodbye to the others with a strong handshake.

"It was an excellent hunt," Dergan told them.

-Are you sure you don't want to tell the father? –Mateo asked Gaspar Santos.

-Yeah. What happened is that his old man's business went bankrupt. They were silver people, who have fallen into disrepair. Besides, he has caught the vice... -and he raised his elbow to be clearer.

"Let me pay for the expense," said Mateo, who had already taken his wallet out of his pants.

Santos grabbed Ibáñez's arm and pulled him away from him.

-No, please, don't even think about it. You must be friends of architect Márquez, right?

-That's how it is.

-He was here this afternoon, we talked at length. But spend a while.

Santos pulled down some chairs from the tables and invited them to sit down. Then he went to look for some chipboard boards to cover up the

broken stained glass window. Mateo and Mauricio got up right away to help him. He wanted to save them the trouble, but they insisted. They then grabbed the dogs' bodies and put them in garbage bags.

"Let's save two to dissect," said Mateo.

Dergan watched the street in case others appeared. He passed a motorcycle and the driver stopped.

-What happened? -asked

"We killed some wild dogs," Mauricio answered, suspiciously.

The guy was robust, with military-like gestures and intonation, but he was in civilian clothes. He didn't ask her anything else, he just wished her good night and walked on. Mauricio remained uneasy.

-Who was he? –Santos asked.

-I don't know, curious, but he didn't give me confidence. We better finish quickly.

They closed the bags and left the bodies where Santos left the remains of meat to throw away the next day. The bodies they reserved were placed against a wall.

-No There are cats, aren't there? –Mauricio asked, half jokingly, half seriously, while he sat down to have a beer that Santos invited them.

The three laughed, Santos said:

-I have one, but since these dogs have been there, he hasn't left the bar. He - he got up to look for it, but he didn't find it. - Who is going to find him with these bodies tonight.

They told him about the attack on Márquez, and Santos felt guilty; It was he, he told them, who had indicated to him that he could find dogs in that vacant lot.

"Well, don't worry," said Mauricio, "we already killed them a while ago."

A cool breeze came in through the cracks between the boards and the broken glass. They heard a motorcycle pass by twice, back and forth. They knew it was the same one, and they realized that from that night they would begin to watch them.

-I'm sorry we got you into trouble...

-What problems? –said Santos- With the soldiers? Bahhh…I studied to enter the army after the colimba, for three years. They were the worst of my life. They fucked me until my balls burst, so one day I hit a sergeant at a May 25th parade. They put me in jail for six months. Then I opened this bar.

But I saw a lot of things during that time, and I learned to keep quiet. They're not going to mess with me that easily, but with you it's different, with the professionals, I mean. You are guys who think, and for them that is the same as saying left-wing reactionaries.

Ibáñez looked at him with surprise, and realized that Dergan shared that same sudden complicity towards that stranger who suddenly seemed to be more than a friend. A guy with a careless appearance, long, disheveled hair, a graying and blonde beard, with an apron that he still wore at that time of night, and a dishcloth that he put in and out of the apron pocket to dry the table every time a glass left a circle.

-Well, I think we have to go... -Mauricio said almost half an hour later, he got up to go look for the bags that they would take to the morgue first thing in the morning.

-Are you sure about the stained glass? –Matthew insisted.

-Sure, doctor, don't say more.

-Then let us pay for the beers...

-It's okay, if you insist.

The three shook hands tightly as they said goodbye.

-It has been a pleasure meeting you. A hug from me to the architect and Dr. Ruiz, I'll see if I can visit the hotel tomorrow.

-We are waiting for you...Take care.

-Take care of yourselves, you still have to walk several blocks.

They greeted each other for the last time. As they walked away from the bar, they both thought, without saying it, that Santos was right. They had two dead dogs still bleeding in those bags. Mateo decided to carry them himself, so that Dergan could shoot if necessary. They looked with extreme care everywhere when they reached each corner

The night was humid and the dew made the cobblestones shine in the poor light from the porches. A siren howled many blocks away, the cool breeze moved the branches of the trees that tried to touch each other from sidewalk to sidewalk on the street. Then, they heard the motorcycle again, and Dergan was the only one who stopped, abruptly, just over the curb of the sidewalk, listening. The motorcycle moved away again. Mateo carried the bags like two bales of potatoes on one shoulder, and since he didn't see him stop, he had continued on across the street. Mauricio resumed walking behind Ibáñez, and began to observe his back, as if he did not recognize him. Ibáñez seemed like the man with the bag, the one who even in different cultures represented the hated stranger who came to take away bad children.

Mauricio remembered the year before he arrived in the country, the men who carried their children in similar bags. The children who had died from the rabies transmitted by the dogs that he, in the small coastal town in French Brittany, had not known how to stop. Dogs that came out of the caves in the cliffs, where they hid from men. There were almost thirty animals that lived there, feeding on the fish that the sea threw to the coast, on the sheep that they managed to kill when they climbed the cliff every night. Sometimes they went into the farms and killed chickens and fought with other dogs. This was perhaps how several domestic dogs began to become infected. The owners would euthanize them, but sometimes they would call Dergan to make sure it wasn't another illness, because the children didn't want their dogs euthanized. When he confirmed the suspicion, they were killed. He then began to immunize the neighbors' animals. Few took them to town to vaccinate them as puppies, so in less than a week his vaccine supplies ran out and he had to order more to be purchased in the nearest city. Meanwhile, the wild dogs continued to wreak havoc, but the hunters managed to corner them in their caves and suffocate them with gases. or they left poisoned food at the entrance. Some men came to town with serious bites, and Maurice watched the only ambulance with his doctor and nurse come and go. In the small hospital there were two fatal cases of rabies in humans.

It took a week for the new batch of vaccines to arrive, and he himself dedicated himself to going from house to house to vaccinate the dogs. Two days later, he was out of vaccinations again, and he called to ask for more. More than half of the dogs and other animals in the town remained unvaccinated. People offered to help him. When the new party arrives, he told them.

That's when the same dogs he had vaccinated began showing symptoms of rabies. First a man came asking him how that could be, and he replied that it must be another illness. When he accompanied him to his farm, the woman received them desperate and crying. The sheepdog had bitten their son two hours ago. The boy had a fever and was pouring a lot of saliva from his mouth.

Maurice couldn't believe this was happening. They showed him the dog, which was tied, barking like crazy and with drool in its mouth. Next to the veterinarian, the man had the shotgun ready, and he fired. He dropped the gun and ran to his son's room. Dergan followed him. The boy was delirious between the sheets, his mother tried to console him. Her shoulder looked at Dergan with resentment and anguish at the same time. He would receive many similar expressions in the following days, but that, because it was the first, was the only one that he could never forget.

That same afternoon, several women and men that he knew and greeted almost every morning in the town came to look for him, people with whom he stopped to talk and to whom he asked about the condition of any horse, calf or dog that had been tending to him. yesterday. This time they

came to ask him what had happened with the vaccines, and then the questions turned into reproaches, and very soon the accusations followed one another without obstacles or interruptions. Suddenly, he found himself surrounded by people talking at the same time, faces that were gesticulating without him being able to understand what they were saying. He even believed, for a moment, that everyone spoke foreign languages, like a kind of Babel after divine punishment against pride and vanity.

He tried to explain, but he realized that he did not have any logical theory, and the only plausible one - that the batch of vaccines was a fraud, and it was not the first time it had happened - would not serve him well to evade the responsibility of he. Had he, perhaps, checked the manufacturing date and the health department marks? Maybe he did it, as was his custom, or maybe not, in a hurry to vaccinate the largest number of animals in a few days.

He let himself be overwhelmed by the crowd, he fell in the middle of the grass with his head in his hands. Someone must have taken pity on him, or perhaps simply wanted to have him alone to take revenge. It occurred to him that he could be the father of the boy who was dying on that farm, but soon he would learn that at the same time there were many other boys who were experiencing the same thing. So it could be this man or any other, for that reason or any other. Now he was only aware that they were pushing and pulling him by the arms towards a van, and then driving off while people banged on the glass and sides of the vehicle, shouting through the imperfect silence of the windows and their own insensitivity, that layer protective that fear had created around her.

The town doctor gave him a sedative and they kept him locked up in his house for two days, with a guard at the door. When they let him out, he went to his office and found him devastated. Animals undergoing treatment had been killed, his own dogs were dead as well, as were the cats he bred to sell. He went to the police station and they treated him with polite coldness.

"It wasn't his fault that they sold him adulterated vaccines, doctor, but he should have looked better," the main officer told him.

Dergan wondered if they had checked the vial bottles, if they had done a proper investigation. He decided not to ask, if they had left him free it was because there was no way to assign any crime to him. Before leaving, the commissioner advised him:

-Go through the cemetery, doctor, and then you can leave the town.

He packed his bags and got into his car. He stopped at the cemetery gate. Inside, the entire field was full of people, it looked like an anthill full of black ants carrying branches. But the branches were children's coffins.

Children killed by rabies.

Mauricio Dergan was thinking about all this when he and Ibáñez arrived at the hotel. He had not even realized which streets or paths they had passed through, he just followed Mateo as that distant day he had followed the column of men carrying the coffins. of their children. She had escaped from the present and the night to transport herself to another world far away on a sunny day of mourning. They could have been attacked by the dogs without him even realizing it, and he felt responsible for the trust that Ibáñez had placed in him, and that he had disappointed. Like that time, a long time ago, in a coastal town in Brittany.

The dogs, however, did not attack again that night. When he reached the door of the hotel, he felt that they were watching him from the street. As if that something or someone, many perhaps, were laughing at his distraction and his lost consciousness in time, he even thought he heard grunts like simulated laughter of pity and contempt. As if the dogs remembered their ancestors through distance and years, those dogs that he, Maurice Dergan, had allowed to survive.

22

In the morning, Ruiz woke up with a strong jolt when the alarm clock rang. It was seven o'clock, and he didn't even remember why he had set the alarm at that time. While he brushed his teeth, he remembered that the autopsy of Ibáñez's wife began at eight. Farías had called him at night, shortly after Mauricio and Mateo left. Then he had gone to bed and hadn't seen them return. He only heard the noises of doors and soft murmurs that mixed with his dreams. Nightmares that returned from time to time to remind him of what he was from a time before, a man inhabited by insects, nothing more than another habitat for those beings that used to survive storms and cataclysms, surpass the generations of men and transform themselves through simplicity. of their quantity and rudimentary life, almost as eternal as the gods. And he had often thought that perhaps they were more durable than the weak gods created by men, gods who nurtured creatures in their bellies.

He thought about what Ansaldi had told him, and he was ashamed of having defied Mateo, of having betrayed him for the old man's sterile promise. How he intended to help him, even if what he said about his age and origin was true. What lived in Ruiz's body was already irreversible. Taking it out was the same as dying. They, the insects, were like another viscera, or even like blood itself. And in some way, the dogs constituted something similar for Dergan, because Ruiz knew the reason why he had emigrated from France. Animals were parasites that slowly weakened the

organisms that hosted them, making them what they wanted, subjecting their lives to the desires and needs of others.

He passed by the rooms of his friends. He knocked on the doors. Mauricio was sleeping. Mateo slept with his son. Márquez was awake, sitting on the bed. The bandages were no longer bleeding and he looked brighter.

-How are you?

-Better thanks.

-Stay in bed a little longer, I'll order you to bring up breakfast.

Walter couldn't answer him, he ran to the bathroom. He must have been decomposed, it was common for nervous temperaments like his to somatize stress with this type of disorder.

He went down to the dining room and the cook brought him coffee with milk.

-And your colleagues are going down to breakfast, doctor?

-No. Just bring the architect some tea with lemon, please.

She returned to the kitchen. Ruiz looked at the time, it was already a quarter to eight. He wondered what those two who were trying to play hunters had done last night. He saw Ansaldi coming, who stood next to him after saying good morning.

-When you finish your breakfast, doctor, I must tell you something.

-Tell me now, because I have to go to the hospital.

-His colleagues, Dr. Ruiz, made a killing last night. I heard the shots, and saw them enter with dirty clothes. Dr. Ibáñez had two bags with bodies. They must be in his room.

Ruiz took a sip of coffee, and waited for him to continue.

-You have to take them to Valverde, doctor. It won't let me in, only you have the opportunity.

-Don't say stupid things. It's not going to convince me like yesterday.

-Doctor, please. Don't be temperamental and think a little. Even if you don't trust me, I suggest you remember everything I've told you, doesn't what I know guarantee my promise? Can Dr. Ibáñez say the same, even if he has his trust?

-And what guarantee do you give me that you can help me?

-Talk to Valverde, and he will know. But he will only tell him if he brings him the dogs, it will be a payment of trust for him to talk.

Ruiz stood up, his hands shaking with anger. Ansaldi stepped back a little.

-I know that the decision I am asking of you is difficult, doctor, but I suggest that you weigh -and he made the delicate gestures of someone handling a scale of dishes- the defects of a small betrayal against the benefits of you recovering your previous life.

At that moment Blas's cry was heard. Ruiz went up the stairs and knocked on Mateo's door. When the door opened, Ibáñez had the child in his arms. arms, who cried without consolation.

-I don't know what's wrong with her, she woke me up screaming like that. He doesn't have a fever, he must be hungry and bored of this hotel.

Ruiz wondered if his friend was finally coming to her senses and he would decide to leave town.

-Why don't you continue sleeping, you look haggard. I'll take care of the boy.

-But today is...

-I know, don't think about that...

-You don't understand, I have to take the dogs that we killed last night to have them autopsied.

-I don't know if there is time, but I'm going to try. I'll take them, tell me where they are.

Ibáñez pointed to the closet. Ruiz opened the door and found the bundles under his dirty clothes. He pulled them out and dragged them across the room.

-Are you going to be able to alone?

-Yes do not worry. You and Mauricio have to sleep.

-You're right, tonight we have to go out again.

Ruiz pretended to agree, but he felt that everything was getting worse and worse. His friend pitied him. He hadn't shaved since Saturday, and probably hadn't showered when he came back last night, and his reddish hair was disheveled and dirty. He was only wearing pajama pants that were half loose at the waist, and he held Blas in his arms, rocking him to make him fall asleep again.

-I'm going to tell the cook to give you breakfast.

"Thank you..." Mateo said, and got into bed again, laying the boy next to him. "For last night, excuse me, but I don't know if I understood your attitude correctly, I was tired..." and he yawned.

"It's okay..." was the only thing Ruiz responded, then he left the room, leaving the door open. He walked down the steps and reached the bottom of the stairs. Ansaldi looked at him from the reception, with a slight satisfied smile.

He told the cook about the boy's breakfast and left dragging the bags. He put them in the trunk of the car and left for Valverde's pharmacy.

-Thank you, Dr. Ruiz.

The pharmacist was behind the counter, wrapping some powders that he himself prepared in parchment paper. He left them in a corner of the shelf on the side wall and went to pick up the bags that Ruiz had not yet let go. Noticing his resistance, he said:

-You can let them go, I'll take them to the laboratory.

Ruiz relented and watched him enter the hallway. He immediately followed him, and Valverde turned around, asking him:

-Do you need anything, doctor?

-Ansaldi told me that you could answer me a question.

The pharmacist left the bags on the dissection table, opened them with a knife, and the dead dogs spread the smell of him.

-They must have been locked up all night...

-In a closet in the hotel...-said Ruiz.-Last night Ibáñez and Dergan hunted them.

-It's unfortunate, after everything we talked about on Sunday...

-Valverde –Ruiz interrupted him.- Ansaldi must have told him about my problem...

-That's right, doctor, the first time he brought me the dogs he told me so. He believed that you, especially, could understand our common cause.

Ruiz's hands were shaking. He also felt that his stomach was contracting in short, intense spasms.

-He told me... that you could help me get them off my back.

Valverde was only a little taller than him, and with the light blue coat and green eyes, slicked-back hair and calloused hands from contact with

chemicals and corpses in formaldehyde, he looked much more intimidating than the scrawny, long-haired figure. Ruiz's curly hair and almost childish face.

With a hand on the doctor's shoulder, in a manner of gentle friendship, he answered:

-Let me show you something and I'll tell you my theory.

He led him back into the hallway and they stood in front of the last door. Valverde opened it with a key and turned on the light knob. The room was full of shelves on the walls, occupied by transparent, square, rectangular or cylindrical jars. Almost all had fetuses in different stages of gestation.

Ruiz began to walk among the corpse preparations. Each one had its label with the weeks of gestation, but without names, of course. In some there were complete placentas or only fragments. So this was what he had been doing all those years since he came from the countryside, Ruiz thought. That was how he made his living, more than what he could get from the pharmacy. But he was sure that he wouldn't charge much for abortions. His own way of life belied any ostentation of money or luxury.

-Look, doctor. You know that the placenta is a tissue of revitalization. If its cells are cultured, they can generate some, at least partial, rejuvenation. Well, I would say we can do something similar. What you carry inside, doctor, could be expelled by these new cells.

-But…

-I know, you don't trust my rudimentary methods, but look at the dogs, doctor, who created them?

Ruiz told himself that he must be crazy to believe in Valverde. However, that whole situation now seemed like a long dream while he actually ad he was sleeping in Buenos Aires, with his first girlfriend, Cecilia Taboada. But he remembered that even she used to recite strange poems that somehow foreshadowed everything that was happening to her: the insects and the dead dogs. Then all time and his circumstances seemed to him like an endless spiral that added objects and living beings, involving him at its center, but he did not know if the direction of that spiral was heaven or hell, nor if these parameters were of some kind. value or meaning even.

He felt nauseous, Valverde realized. He saw an expression of contempt and irony on the pharmacist's face.

-Come on, doctor, I know all this impresses you.

Ruiz felt ashamed, and the shame made him feel angry. He let go of Valverde's hand, who was holding him by the elbow, and left the room. He leaned against a hallway wall and took a deep breath. He decided not to vomit, he didn't want to give that satisfaction to the other, but he wasn't

sure he could hold on when he saw him approaching with a cotton ball soaked in alcohol. He put it under his nose and the smell of it revived him.

-Feel better?

Ruiz nodded and left the pharmacy with a quick step. He bumped into a woman at the door, who greeted him, but he didn't even notice her. He only turned around to tell Valverde that he would return that night to begin treatment.

23

The hotel appeared uninhabited until early afternoon. Ruiz had left the pharmacy before noon, but he was not yet back when Walter got up. It was almost two in the afternoon. Dergan was still sleeping, but she did not enter his room. He peeked into Mateo's room through the half-open door. Ibáñez was face down on the bed, with his legs spread, his arms crossed under the pillow and his head on one side. The boy was awake and playing with his father's hair, but he didn't seem to notice.

Walter came in and took the boy away to entertain him a little. The lobby was empty, as was the reception. For almost half an hour he taught Blas how to build airplanes and cars with paper he took from the counter. They were an ideal size for that, soft in consistency but not too light. The letterhead with the name of the hotel was the least that mattered when it came to building those little paper airplanes. He wasn't hungry, even though he hadn't had lunch. He felt better, and it was no less a factor knowing that the others were sleeping, out of the danger that the dogs represented, even far from starting a job that no one was willing to do. The only one who wasn't there was Ruiz, he was probably still in the hospital.

He saw Santos enter, and was surprised, because he had not thought about him since he left the bar the previous day.

-Good afternoon, Márquez. They told me what happened yesterday, how do you feel?

Walter shook his hand and said:

- Much better, I got it cheap.

-Let him say it, my friend! If you saw what the doctors did last night near my business. I'll tell you.

They sat. Blas came crawling over the hallway carpet.

-And who is this little guy?

-Ibáñez's son. Her mother was killed by the dogs on Saturday.

-The hell...! He –he lamented, hitting his forehead with the palm of one hand.- Now I understand why he is doing what he does. I wondered how a professional like him...

-That's right, Gaspar. He's getting even, as best he can.

-I would do the same, I suppose, but for a while now I feel more and more cowardly. I don't know if it's having established myself as a merchant, and the truth is that I spend most of my time alone, except for clients, of course.

Blas stopped to lean on Santos' knees. Gaspar lifted him with inexperienced hands and began to lift him on his legs.

-He is a beautiful boy, and he looks a lot like his father. Thank goodness he is still a baby, he must hardly be aware of what has happened to him.

-I think so, and he is a very calm boy. Everything is put up even though this hotel is in chaos these days. Sometimes we don't eat or sleep, or like now, the father hasn't gotten up yet.

-Let him rest, because tonight they are going to go back hunting. I think I'm going to join them this time, see if I can get my courage up a bit.

Santos was laughing at himself, and Walter offered him a drink.

-A coffee with sherry?

- Damn! “Thank you, architect,” he said, looking for the manager.

-Don't worry, Ansaldi is in his room, I think, I haven't seen him since I got up.

But at that moment the nephew appeared from the kitchen. His hand was bandaged but he looked fine.

-Manuel! –Santos greeted him, ruffling his hair. –They told me that they had bitten you...

-I'm better now, it almost doesn't hurt anymore.

-And your uncle? –Marquez asked.

-In the room, looking at his photo album, as always. They want that Does anything help you?

-Well, if you feel like it. I brought two strong coffees and a glass of sherry.

Manuel left and Walter was left thinking about the boy. He looked a little taller, looking better than he did before he was injured. When he returned with the tray and the coffees, he asked her jokingly:

-What did they do to you in the hospital? You look better than before.

-Nothing, they cured my hand. But the uncle says that he went because of the dog bite. Saliva renews blood cells.

The others looked at each other with a common expression of mockery.

-And do you notice any difference?

-Well, I think I do better with accounts and mathematics. I used to draw things, inventions, I don't know, but now they are easier for me.

He was embarrassed to continue talking, and he went to the kitchen.

-That Ansaldi is a very strange guy. He always was.

-And since when has he known him?

-I think forever, I don't even remember when he opened this hotel. It's funny, but I don't remember...

-It doesn't matter, it's just curiosity...

At that moment Ruiz entered. He came crestfallen, distracted, and didn't notice them until he passed by the couch.

-Doctor Ruiz...

-Good afternoon, Gaspar. He looked at Walter and asked:

-Better?

Márquez nodded and wanted to know.

-Are you coming from the hospital? Did they do an autopsy on Alma?

Ruiz looked at him without answering, made a dismissive gesture with his hand and began to climb the stairs. They heard the door to his room close abruptly.

-Something must have happened...

-Yes, well, I'll leave it Walter, I have to take care of my business and you have problems to solve. See you later.- He left, saying goodbye to Blas with a kiss with the smell of sherry and saliva on his beard, which the boy seemed to like.

At six in the afternoon, Walter and Blas were on the couch, asleep and illuminated by the last rays of the sun that descended behind the houses opposite. Dergan and Ibáñez came down together, freshly bathed and refreshed. They wore clean clothes.

-Look at these two... –said Mauricio.

Ibáñez picked up Blas and woke him up to give him a snack. He was in a better mood, the hunt the night before had represented something new for him, perhaps because it was something he had done with his own hands to compensate for Alma's death. And the next night he was coming he would make him feel even better, stronger and in exultant spirits. Walter woke up and greeted them both.

-I'm glad to see you looking good.

-Did Ruiz say anything to you about the dogs?

-What dogs?

-Those we killed last night, he took them to the hospital for an autopsy. This way they avoid Alma's. I should have gone myself, but he was exhausted.

-He arrived almost three hours ago, he didn't tell me anything about that. He locked himself in the room.

The three looked at each other, but Mateo was the only one who ran up the stairs and started banging on Ruiz's door. The others followed him.

-Bernard! Open!

For more than a minute no one answered him. Dergan tried to calm Mateo down, but he didn't want to.

-Open up, son of a bitch! I shouldn't have held you responsible, just you, you fucking traitor!

The door was made of solid oak, and Ibáñez's insistent knock could barely be heard. Blas had started crying, and Walter took it out of his father and took him downstairs to calm him down.

-Stop a little, will you! Don't go ahead without knowing...-Dergan said.

-But you don't realize, he hides because he knows that he betrayed us. Who knows what he did with the dogs... -He thought for a moment and hit his forehead against the door-... He must have taken them to Valverde. Open up, Bernardo, open up, I'll break your face!

Mauricio began to pull Mateo away from the door.

-Then let's go see Ansaldi, who was the one who gave him those ideas...

-First I'm going to shit this guy who called himself our friend, then I'll take care of the old man... -and he hit again.

But then they heard the door lock, then the handle moved. Because it was so sudden, Mateo didn't try to push. He let Bernardo open the door, and they saw him standing there, completely naked, his short curls wet not from a shower but from perspiration, his eyes watering. But above all what surprised them was seeing Ruiz's skeletal figure, his ribs protruding, his abdomen flat and narrow, his pelvic bones sticking out like the ends of a bow. However, his abdomen moved, as if Ruiz had the ability to voluntarily move his intestines, in the form of small movements or spurts that lifted the skin and then gave way. Bernardo put his hands on his stomach, frowning as if the pain were already unbearable.

He left the door open and lay down on the bed. The others asked him what was wrong with him. He didn't answer them, what could he say to them without making them think he was making fun of them or he had gone crazy.

-What's the matter? What are those spasms?

-Nothing you can avoid, Mateo. They're going to pass me by now. There are times when it happens to me more often.

Dergan and Ibáñez looked at each other without understanding.

-But are you sure?

Ruiz shook his head answering that he did.

"Leave us alone, Mateo," Mauricio asked him.

Ibáñez began to leave when he heard Ruiz tell him:

-I didn't go to the hospital.

Ibáñez turned around in anger, but when he saw that weak and naked body on the bed he couldn't say anything and left. Mauricio sat in a chair next to the bed. He suspected that his friend was hiding some serious, perhaps terminal, illness from him. He begged her to tell him. Ruiz decided to tell him everything that had happened to him in Le coer antique.

Dergan did not expect any such explanation, but somehow he knew that Bernardo was not lying to him. More than words, Bernardo Ruiz's body was confessing with the obvious and peculiar resemblance, with that strange way in which the body of a man simulates, although still distantly, the figure of an insect.

At ten at night, Ibáñez was ready to leave. Mauricio still loaded his gun in silence. He did not want to explain to Ibáñez what was really happening to Ruiz, even if it was the only way to justify what he had done. He limited himself to listening to Mateo's reproaches and fury.

-I called the hospital, they did an autopsy on my wife. You realize? “They opened it all up,” he said, clutching the rifle and staring blankly at the street door. -Hurry up, will you!

He stayed silent for a while, waiting for Dergan to finish dressing and eat something before leaving. Then he murmured:

-First the dogs, then Valverde and the old man, finally our dear friend Ruiz.

He realized that Mauricio was looking at him.

-Do not make that face. If he's dying better for everyone, I'll do him a favor by finishing him off like a dog.

Mauricio was afraid to go hunting with Ibáñez. He was now a man more dangerous to his own cause than to hers. At that moment Santos entered.

-Good night. I accompany you today.

He was wearing jeans and a black leather jacket, with gelled hair and a solid wooden stick.

-I killed a couple of dogs with this a few weeks ago. They don't let me carry firearms, but this may help, if they allow me.

Dergan told him that yes, he was fine. He felt better with someone else in case he had to control Ibáñez.

-The Benítez boys are outside. They want to accompany us, but I told them they had to ask your permission.

Dergan agreed, Santos looked at Ibáñez, who did not answer him and looked stubbornly towards the door. Then he was surprised to hear him say.

-Are you ready Dergan, you fucking bastard? Or you want to paint yourself and wear skirts to go out. We are going to kill, not let ourselves be fucked by the damn dogs.

Walter was holding Blas, who was finishing dinner. Ansaldi had peeked out from his room. Ruiz was coming down the stairs, wearing jeans and a bare torso. It was as if Mateo had heard him step on the worn but still soft carpet of the steps, as if his ears had acquired the acuity of an experienced

hunter. He turned to look him in the eyes, and his silence was more hurtful than any insult he could have invented.

They went out into the street. At the corner they met the Benítez family. They greeted each other with a handshake, as if there were no difference in age or profession. There were only five men who went out hunting, and instead of a forest or a jungle, it was a city. But the darkness in those suburban streets is almost the same as in a closed forest illuminated only by the light of the moon. Here, the porch lights were like fireflies, and the mercury lights were little glass-encased moons.

Ibáñez had taken command that night on his own initiative. Mauricio did not dare to contradict him, he feared that the fury intended for the dogs would be directed at anyone who stood in their way.

This time, they went in the opposite direction from the previous night. They walked four blocks without finding any signs of dogs. When they were going to continue a little further, a car stopped in the middle of the block. It was a white Fiat 600, and Santos immediately recognized Rodrigo Casas.

-Gaspar –said the baker.- Since you told me that they were leaving today, I came to tell them. This afternoon, when I went to collect rent from the Cortézes, I heard noises in Costa's warehouse.

"We already reviewed it yesterday," said Mauricio.

-But maybe they weren't there yesterday, they change places very often...

-Thank you, let's go there.

-I can do something?

-Do you have a weapon? –Matthew asked.

"Only the rolling pin," he laughed, and the others celebrated.

But Mateo remained serious and walked away.

-Then better not -said Santos.-We don't want there to be more injuries, but thanks for the information.

Casas started and they followed Ibáñez. When they reached the warehouse, they put their ears to the doors and closed windows. One of the boys said he heard puppies crying. Although the others did not hear anything, they decided to enter. They searched the sidewalk for some metal to tear off the wood from the door. Then they lifted the old, rusty curtain. Santos illuminated the interior with the flashlight, while Ibáñez and Dergan took aim. The Benítezes waited a few meters back, with the waves ready.

Some rats came out, but mostly a smell of dirt and rotten food. They couldn't lift the curtain much more than fifty centimeters, so Dergan, pushing Ibáñez, crouched down and entered the warehouse. Mateo followed him and Santos went after him. The boys, no matter how much they wanted to, did not dare to enter. Luckily, Santos gave them a reason to stay outside:

-Watch, in case the gray hair appears.

They stayed at the door, suspicious of every light and every car whose engine they could still hear from afar.

Inside, the three men advanced slowly, stepping cautiously on any glass or metal that might be present. The flashlight barely illuminated an area no larger than a meter, and it was not enough distance in case the dogs appeared. Only Santos remembered the inside of the warehouse, and even in the darkness and abandonment he was unable to locate himself well.

-There at the back was the counter, and to the right was a hallway that led to the rooms.

-The dogs must have hidden there to give birth. "You stay at the entrance to the hallway," Ibáñez told Dergan. "If they escape, you will shoot them." We look inside.

Mauricio saw them disappear. The flashlight beam disappeared behind a wall, and he saw nothing but darkness. He heard the footsteps of his friends, dragging their soles across the floor covered with multiple layers of dust and dirt. From outside he could hear the sound of the street, which, no matter how faint, represented a relief. Above all, the fresh air combated the humidity of the warehouse that worsened the discomfort in his ankle.

He suddenly heard the boys' screams. He couldn't understand what they were saying to him. It was undoubtedly something bad, because there was a tone of anguish in their voices, which receded with the panting of those who run away. Then he heard the engines stopping at the warehouse door. He knew it was the police. Who could have warned them, he wondered. Casas, don't even think about it, maybe Ansaldi, or Ruiz himself, although it hurt his soul just to think he was capable of that. But the most likely thing was that the guy with the motorcycle from the night before was the real person responsible.

He ran in the dark, tripping over obstacles that he couldn't see, chairs, tables, bottles. He knew that all that noise would only tell the soldiers where he was escaping. But he had no choice but to tell his friends to flee, but where he asked himself. The only exit was blocked. He called softly. He opened a couple of doors before coming across Ibáñez and Santos, who were standing looking at something in the back of one of the rooms. The light was weak, they hadn't even taken the precaution of checking the batteries before leaving.

-The military! Come on! –He told them.

But they didn't pay attention to him. Then he looked towards the same place as them, and saw the bodies of four naked men, with their skin full of bites and burns, their almost unrecognizable faces covered in blood and wounds, their heads shaved, and their hands tied behind their backs. . He heard the noise that the boys had heard from outside, a cry similar to the moan of an abandoned and dying animal. He came from one of those men, but it was impossible to tell because the mouths had swollen lips and they all looked the same.

-Come on! Where do we go out, Gaspar?!

Santos looked at him and seemed to have just realized what Mauricio was asking of him. From the warehouse, he could hear the metallic noise of the curtain being dented, and then the footsteps of boots on the floor.

-Let me think...Costa had an exit at the back, towards the house.

The three of them walked out into the hallway and saw the lanterns approaching. The back door was not closed, but rust had damaged the lock and hinges. Ibáñez shot the lock twice, and the door opened. They met in the Cortéz garden. The grass was wet, and the blind dogs welcomed them.

The animals were fighting with the other dogs that lived there, so they ignored them at first. They shot into the air to get them away, but it was another bad decision that night. The blind dogs were now warned of them, so they left the others, who escaped to hide in the warehouse at the back. And they looked for the men.

Dergan and Ibáñez pointed at them, Santos got between them with his stick ready. They advanced towards the house slowly. From the warehouse, the police appeared. Someone opened the door of the house and the voice and music of the house were heard. e a record player playing Moussorgsky's last dance, which speaks of death like a field marshal walking the battlefield.

"This way!" said a woman's voice.

They looked toward the porch and saw María Cortez motioning for them to get inside.

"We have only one chance," said Mauricio. –Let's run as fast as we can.

From the street, more white dogs arrived.

"My God," Santos murmured, and his paleness became so evident that they both had to hold him by the arms and run with him to the house. But then they heard a shot, and Ibáñez felt that the weight he was carrying was now double. They were on the porch steps, he and Santos, but Dergan was left lying in the garden. He looked toward the warehouse, but the police had

already gone back inside. He went to where Mauricio was. He turned her around and looked at her wide-eyed, expressionless face. Around him, the dogs, more than ten of them, threatened him with their fangs out and drooling yellowish saliva. María Cortez helped Santos get up and they both entered the house. The door closed. And for a moment, Ibáñez believed that no roof would accept him, that no door would protect him from the danger and terror that he had already seen twice in two days.

He looked at the dogs that surrounded him, those dogs that knew how to observe him more acutely with their sense of smell and their ears than he, capable of all the potentiality of his eyes, would have been able to see in his entire life. he. Because the dogs were something else, formed there in a circle, almost uniformed with that slenderness of their white hair on their robust bodies. And beyond the fence, more arrived, one after another, while sirens could be heard in the night. Cars that would probably arrive very soon to take away all the bodies, those in the warehouse and those of both of them. That of his friend the veterinarian and his own, who would soon be between the fangs of the dogs, being pulled and torn like prey in an African meadow.

Then he heard Ruiz's voice. He looked up and saw the weak and scrawny figure of Bernardo carrying a kind of torch to scare away the dogs in his path, but he could not go beyond the fence.

-The rifle! –He heard me shouting at him.

But he couldn't understand it over the barking. Ruiz yelled at him again while he threatened the dogs that tried to approach him with the flame. Mateo saw Mauricio's gun, grabbed it and threw it into the garden. Some dogs ran towards it, the animals sniffed the weapon and returned to where they were.

Bernardo jumped over the fence and almost dropped the torch, but he held it in time and scared away the dogs that kept threatening him. Then he let go of her and immediately grabbed the gun. He began shooting almost more expertly than Dergan. He aimed and fired without missing a single shot, and when the first dogs began to fall, the others became frightened and fled. Only a few were left wandering around the garden without knowing where to escape. They jumped on the other dead dogs, crashed into the walls of the house or warehouse, into the fence. Ruiz fired again, he seemed determined not to leave anyone alive. Soon the garden was covered with corpses, and Mateo, looking at them, felt that now he could hear the song coming from the house clearly. The music surrounded Bernardo while he fired the last shots and he walked among the bodies to see if any of them were still alive, like a field marshal, a victor.

Much further back, on the street, was Ansaldi. His face was shining with sweat, and he was panting as if he had come running. He looked older, and Mateo thought it was like seeing a man finished a long time ago, while he

looked at that massacre, that field of dogs that, in some uncertain and absurd way, constituted his offspring.

Bernardo arrived where his friends were. He knelt next to Mauricio's body, and closed his eyes. He looked at Mateo sadly, and Ibáñez saw that he was crying, with his forehead wrinkled and his mouth drooping as if his face were that of an ancient doll that had been deformed by the heat of fire and weapons. Mateo believed that he was crying for Mauricio, but he did too, although Mateo didn't know it yet, for what he had just sacrificed. He was crying for both things, surely, and also for what he had just seen that night, the feared inconsequentiality of each death and the incorruptible decrepitude of the world.